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# GEORGE BELLAIRS

## OUTRAGE ON GALLOWS HILL



# **Outrage on Gallows Hill**

**A Thomas Littlejohn Mystery**

George Bellairs



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O P E N  R O A D

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# 1.

## NIGHT IN THE VILLAGE

*“Charming night, friend of criminals.”*

CHARLES BAUDELAIRE

THE night of Tuesday, September 25th, 1945, was as black as pitch in the village of Ravelstone. The rural council, jealous of the beauty of the place, would have nothing to do with street lamps. Most of the houses had their curtains or blinds drawn and you couldn't see an inch before your nose.

Lovers who had not made a precise rendezvous were hunting about for one another like participants in a game of blind-man's-buff. Those whose affairs were open and above board called each other softly by name and ultimately met, greatly to their joy and satisfaction. The clandestine ones, however, had a bad time, and many of them returned home very late and in an exhausted condition after fruitlessly prowling in the dark for hours.

The only bright spot in the village was the house of Mrs. Cliffe-Wynrowe, the would-be leader of musical activities. She had all the lights on and the curtains drawn back as far as they would go, and she was to be seen thrashing the piano, flinging her long, thin arms up and down and contorting her body like an epileptic for the benefit of passers-by.

Lack of illumination, however, was made up for by noise, for the bellringers were hard at it in mid-week practice. Six of their team of eight had turned up and to the expert campanologists of the place the racket had a dot-and-carry-one sound, like a man with a wooden leg. And there was young Jukes, too, just learning the art. His bell gave tongue right on the heels of its forerunner or straight on top of its follower, but never anywhere near midway.

In the Women's Institute a gathering of bored ladies were listening to a lecture. It should have been by Mrs. Topnott, of the neighbouring village of Ditchling Episcopi, on *Some Jams I have Made*, but the good woman had that morning sprained her ankle and had sent her husband to deputise. Canon Bamford Topnott, M.A., F.R.G.S., was therefore giving his well-known masterpiece "Bern-Lötschberg-Simplon," and conducting the members of the Institute, who hadn't been advised of the change until it was too late to keep away, through Switzerland. The vicar of Ravelstone was in the chair.

The Rev. Tancred Turncote presided with one eye on the clock. He was a widower himself, but his prolific daughter, whose husband was in the Army, was living with him with her young family of four. They had no maid and there was another grandchild for the vicar imminent, so he was combining domestic with pastoral duties at the time. Estimating the lecture would end at nine, he had left porridge for the morrow's breakfast simmering on the hob. At nine-fifteen, with Topnott only half way over the Gemmi Pass, Mr. Turncote could stand it no longer. Twitching with nervous emotion he made a furious assault on his friend's coat-tails and told him his time was up. After a whispered conversation and a bit of an argument, the two parsons departed, fortified by a vote of thanks, leaving the women stranded on the Gemmi but eagerly making preparations for getting on with half an hour's leatherwork in spite of it.

If you could have lifted off the roofs of many of the houses of Ravelstone you would have seen the usual evening's activities well under way. Children being put to bed, neighbours playing bridge together, wives knitting or doing housework, with husbands snoozing before the fire, reading the paper, listening to the wireless or just paralysed by boredom. In the local, *The Bird in Hand*, the regulars were just warming up and the darts team were at it like mad.

Mr. Rawlings, who kept rabbits and did a rare trade in skins, was busy feeding his livestock, and Old Turvey was wringing the neck of one of his cock chickens for tomorrow's dinner.

George Shortt, who, under the pseudonym of Maude Temple wrote best-selling romances, rose from the desk in his bungalow on Gallows Hill in despair. He had fallen more desperately in love than any of his own heroes and didn't seem to have a ghost of a chance. The vision of a lovely woman

came between him and his romantics, and the stuff just wouldn't flow. Slapping his feverish brow, he rushed into the open air and raised frantic arms to the invisible sky.

Hilary Paget, who turned out thrillers in a modernised cottage in the village, looked up from his typewriter with such a malevolent gleam in his eyes that his wife, who had found him moody and neglectful of late, put on her outdoor clothes and went for a walk alone rather than sit in the same room with him.

And Professor D'Arcy Lever, who held the chair in Psychology in the nearby University of Melchester, was quarrelling furiously with his wife, too. They had not married for love, but as a working partnership. The books of Robert and Clarice D'Arcy Lever are well known. Robert without Clarice would be like sausage without mash! But he had become a bit intractable. If the secret were only known, Clarice had always made the bullets for Robert to fire, and now he had grown resentful of the grip in which she held him ... He tossed the galleys of their latest work on the floor, put on his hat, and went into the dark before she could ask, as usual, where he was going ...

Dr. Paul Gell, village practitioner, kissed his wife, Patricia, herself a qualified physician, and went off to a confinement which he had bet her would end in twins ...

And P.C. Joseph Costain, who shared with P.C. William Butt the administration of law and order in the adjacent villages of Ravelstone and Ditchling Episcopi, welcomed the darkness, for he himself had committed a crime!

It was a very human sort of crime and one which we would probably have done ourselves in similar circumstances.

Patrolling round the byways, the constable had heard familiar rustling sounds accompanied by amorous noises and, flashing his bright lamp over the hedge, had illuminated a covey of partridges, settled, they thought, for the night. Instinctively, for he was a countryman born, with poachers among his forebears, Costain had flung his cape over the dazzled game and before he knew what he was doing he had screwed the necks of three of the largest. Now he was gently descending Gallows Hill, which led to the centre of the village and his own back door, with the spoil wrapped in the same cape, and hoping nobody would intercept him on the way.

The church clock struck a quarter to ten. At ten o'clock P.C. Butt, of Ditchling, was due to relieve Costain. Just time to get the birds indoors.

Although events relentlessly unfolding themselves were eventually to bring Joe Costain his heart's desire, it is always well to remember that God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform!

There was murder in Ravelstone that night and the partridges never saw the village police house. Instead, Will Butt found them and took them home to Ditchling!

Just as Costain and his loot were reaching the home stretch, Ronald Free reluctantly tore himself from the arms of Laura Cruft and emerged from the garden of Apple Tree Farm. He seemed to be walking on air. He had needed to depart quickly and impulsively or he would have been there all night. Laura had just said she would marry him after a long siege and they were both in the seventh heaven of bliss.

Ronald, who had just taken his degree in English and French literature, had obtained a job as junior master at a minor public school. He was by way of being a minor poet, too, and burst into ecstatic verse as he levitated home.

Quand vous serez bien vieile, au soir, à la chandelle,  
Assise auprès du feu, devidant et filant,  
Direz, chantant mes vers, en vous esmerveillant:  
Ronsard me celebroit du temps que j'estois belle.

He'd made a rough translation for his girl. Not so good as yet, but ready for polishing up.

When you are very old, at eve, by candle, there,  
Sitting before the fire, spinning and pondering,  
You'll say, singing my songs and greatly wondering:  
Ronald immortalised me in days when I was fair.

A bit free and the metre wrong, perhaps. And a bit of a cheek putting his own name in place of Ronsard's. But for Laura he'd do anything ...

Je seray sous la terre, et, fantosme sans os ...

Very sad. His emotion brought a lump to Ronald's throat.

I'll be dead then, and, phantom without form ...

Laura never knew about the poem Free had translated and mangled in her honour. Death was upon him before he could recite another word to the darkness around. P.C. Costain stumbled over his body as it lay in the gutter. He had been garotted with a piece of binder twine.

At first, the constable thought Free was drunk, but when by the light of his lamp, he saw first the livid face, with the tongue gripped between the teeth, then the cruel cord biting into his throat, he changed his views. Costain flung his partridges over the hedge. Next, he took out his knife, cut the twine and felt for Free's pulse. The lad was quite dead ...

The doctor's house was at the bottom of Gallows Hill. There was a small plate, *Dr. Gell*, on the gate. The bobby ran full tilt up the garden path and nearly knocked down the door in his haste. Mrs. Gell stood framed in the doorway.

"Is the doctor in, Mrs. Gell?"

"No. He's out on a case. Will I do?"

Costain remembered that Mrs. Gell was a doctor, too.

"Yes, yes, Mrs. Gell. Somebody's done for young Ronald Free. He's lyin' dead up the road ..."

The church clock struck ten and Costain, recollecting his rendezvous with P.C. Butt, blew his whistle. Butt pedalled up on his bicycle almost at once. Doors opened in the village street and people emerged trying to find out what the commotion was about. Questioning voices rose and fell and then it was unanimously decided that some belated boy scout had been whistling to keep up his morale in the dark. So all the doors closed again ...

They carried the body into the doctor's surgery and Mrs. Gell examined it closely. Costain watched her competent fingers at work. She had lovely hands. The policeman, who was at heart a poet, momentarily forgot the tragedy. Mrs. Gell was his idea of what a woman ought to be. She had fair hair which reminded one of wind and sunshine and straight, honest grey eyes. Her nose was finely arched and delicate, her brows clear and intelligent, and her complexion like milk and roses. She was built like a goddess and although she held her head proudly, she was kind. There was

character in her, too, and this added a kind of spiritual grace to her physical beauty.

“She moves like a piece of poethry,” mused P.C. Costain, quoting T. E. Brown, his particular favourite, for the bobby was a Manxman and proud of it.

“Dead as a door-nail,” breathed P.C. Butt hoarsely in Costain’s ear.

The Manxman shook himself, blushed and looked sheepish. Good Lord! Dreaming and reciting poetry to himself with a corpse on his hands.

“May I use your ’phone please, Mrs. Gell?”

“Yes, Costain. Better let your people at Melchester know. Meanwhile, the body can stay here. Poor boy!”

Dr. Paul Gell arrived home. He was tall, in his middle thirties, and he had a mop of unruly fair hair.

“You were right, Pat. It wasn’t twins ... I owe you five bob ...”

His wife pointed to the body on the couch. Gell’s blue eyes opened wide. “Hullo ... Good God!”

The Melchester police didn’t believe in letting the grass grow under their feet. They sent for help to Scotland Yard at once. Rather unusual. But then the Chief Constable, Sir Guy Carey, was an unusual man. He was a close friend of the Assistant Commissioner and knew the limitations of his own men, the majority of whom were down with the ’flu in any case. Sir Guy had won battles in North Africa, whence he had not long returned, by quick decisions after rapidly sizing-up the situation. He cut straight through red-tape and formalities.

Detective-Inspector Littlejohn of the C.I.D., Metropolitan Police, arrived in Ravelstone the following day.

“You lucky fellow,” said Butt to Costain, when the Chief had made his decision in the small hours. “Got a murder right on your doorstep and a Scotland Yard bloke to do the work while you gets the stripes. Had a bit o’ luck meself, too, jest now. Found three loverly partridges near the scene ’o the crime as I was huntin’ round. Don’t know ’ow they come there. Bit of a mystery. But hardly likely to be mixed up with this business. So, I’m takin’ ’em ’ome ... Nuff said.”

P.C. Costain’s remarks are not on record!



## 2.

### DEAD MAN'S BUSINESS

*Fro thennesforth he rideth up and down  
And everything com him to remembraunce  
As he rod for-by places of the town ...*

GEOFFREY CHAUCER (*Troilus and Cressida*)

THE train was full of forces men going home on leave and some belated holidaymakers on their way to the coast. Everybody was good tempered. A homely woman in tweeds insisted on giving the Inspector two chicken sandwiches; three officers returning from India were ecstatic in their praise of British railways; and a little girl with flaxen pigtails, having taken a fancy to him, gave Littlejohn two sticky barley-sugar sweets and saw to it that he ate them.

“Quite an Indian summer,” said the lady in tweeds, looking at the sunlit scene flying past the windows. The three young officers from India thereupon laughed loudly and ironically, and put her in possession of the full facts about the Indian climate.

They all seemed very sorry when Littlejohn said goodbye at Melchester, and the girl with the flaxen hair hung out of the window and waved to him until he was out of sight.

The old cathedral city, capital of Midshire, looked trim and bright. They had scraped off the blackout paint from the glass roof of the station, and stuck a few shrubs in tubs in the main hall. Littlejohn counted two men in straw hats and quite a number in open-necked shirts. Hikers, toiling and moiling under huge rucksacks, earnestly sought trains and information, and

a lackey in a plum coloured frock-coat and a gold-braided hat shepherded a number of new arrivals and their baggage in the direction of the Spa Hotel.

It all gave Littlejohn the holiday feeling.

A tall, heavy-faced man dashed up to the Inspector.

“Inspector Littlejohn? I met you once when I was having a look round Scotland Yard on my holidays. Got a good memory for faces. My name’s Stanley. I’m in charge of the Ravelstone case ...”

Littlejohn felt that his own name ought to have been Livingstone, and wondered if the newcomer was giving his christian name or surname.

“Inspector Stanley, of the Midshire County Police. Very glad to have you with us, sir.”

Stanley was a bit of a dandy as far as the dignity of his public office would allow. Brown suede shoes, green felt hat worn at a slouch, light grey suit, and a blue and white polka-dot tie. His hands were well-kept and he wore a large gold ring on his little finger. He bustled Littlejohn to the cab-rank, greeting passers-by on the way.

“What about a drink, Inspector Littlejohn?”

“I could do with a cup of tea ...”

“Tea? Right. Drive to *The Mikado*, driver. You’ll get a good view of the cathedral there, Inspector ...”

Littlejohn imagined himself on a sightseeing tour.

They arrived at a café decorated in black and gold mock-Japanese style. The manageress beamed on them and conducted them to a table on the first floor. On the way, everybody recognised Stanley and smiled at Littlejohn.

“Mornin’, Inspector. Nice day!”

“Good morning, Mr. Stanley. How are you?”

“Hullo, Stanley. How’s things?”

Like a triumphal procession. There was a special flutter among the women there. Stanley was the most eligible bachelor in town.

They sat in the window alcove. Outside, the view was splendid. The great, lovely cathedral with its peaceful close, and a lot of quaint old houses and shops fresh from an Arthur Rackham drawing. Expensive cars threading their ways through the narrow streets, and dignified ladies and men in gaiters and clerical dog-collars passing to and fro.

“Would you like to see the body before we go over to Ravelstone, sir? It’s in the mortuary here ...”

“The body?” said Littlejohn. “Oh, yes, the body ...”

They were drinking their second cup of tea. Stanley smoked Russian cigarettes and Littlejohn had one in his mouth. The Inspector had accepted and lit it before he knew what he was doing. Stanley never stopped talking. He fidgeted with his tie, too, and cast self-conscious glances at the ladies as though calling on them to observe him in conference with Scotland Yard.

The bishop and his lady entered and everybody looked ready to rise as before Royalty. Then the stir died away, and his Lordship settled down to demolish a pile of flatulent cakes leaking with synthetic cream. “Decent chap, the bishop. I sometimes go to his wife’s *At Home*. Pays you to keep in with the clerical nobs in a place like this. Where was I ...? Oh, yes. Young fellow called Ronald Free was murdered at Ravelstone last night. As far as we can see, right under the local bobby’s nose. You know what these country police are. Probably the fellow was smoking under a hedge or something ...”

Littlejohn grunted. In his mind’s eye he saw a procession of worthy country policemen. Harriwinkle, Mellalieu, Charles Haddon Spurgeon Sadd, and a lot more. Good fellows every one. He resented the slur.

“Generally, a sound, hard-working lot ...”

“Oh, sure. Don’t get me wrong. Just my little joke, sir. Well, the local constable, chap called Costain, came across the body in the gutter. Strangled with a piece of string. Can you beat it?”

Littlejohn didn’t answer. He was watching the bishop lowering his fourth cake and drinking his third cup of tea. Tremendous appetites some of these parsons!

Stanley hitched his polka dots vigorously, nodded to a tall, fair-haired girl who had just entered, and blushed. The bishop, too, forgot his cakes for a minute and greeted the newcomer. His voice reminded Littlejohn of lather.

“As I was saying ... Young Free was murdered and found by Costain. It seems he’d just got engaged to the village beauty, a girl called Laura Cruft. Whether some rival did it, I don’t know. The men were round her like bees round a honey-pot, and it took her a long time to make up her mind. Even then, young Free wasn’t so sure, by all accounts. She’d broken it off with two before him.”

“*Crime passionnel!*” said Littlejohn. He didn’t know quite why he said it. He felt a bit frivolous. Another man in gaiters had entered. Perhaps the

dean. The newcomer bared his teeth at the bishop and they began palavering and pollydoodling together like mad. A fresh plate of cakes arrived and the two clerics set about them with gusto.

Stanley had his back to the new arrival, so he didn't see him.

"*Crime ...?* Oh, yes, yes. *Cherchez la femme*, you mean. Or is it *le femme*? So long since I did any French. Well, as I was saying, Free had just got himself engaged. The girl told us that. Very cut-up, she was, too. Taken her all that time to make up her mind and then, just as she'd made her choice, somebody choked him ..."

Stanley sniggered at his own wit. The bishop and the dean must have made a joke, too, for they burst into roars of laughter, the higher dignitary neighing like a horse and the lesser hooting tremulously like an old owl. The noise seemed infectious, for the whole place was soon shaking with mirth. The thing was fantastic! Here was Littlejohn on a murder case ...

"As I was saying.... They'd got engaged. Young Free had just got a teaching job. He'd graduated at Melchester University. If you stand up you can see the towers just over the left end of the chapter-house there ... See it?"

The little fat dean stopped laughing and looked anxiously at Littlejohn, as though suspecting him of having designs on the fabric of his cathedral.

"Hullo, I hadn't seen the dean come in. That's the dean with the bishop."

Littlejohn was getting a bit fed-up.

"You say Free graduated at the University. What then?"

"Oh, yes. Laura Cruft was a fellow student there, too. That's how they met, I believe. He was taking a degree in literature, they say. She was studying Lord knows what. Her people have plenty of money. Rich farmers. Her mother married a second time. Fellow called Spry. Laura's father died when she was fifteen and left a pile. Spry was bailiff on a nearby farm, moved in and, so to speak, hung his hat up. He's been a good father to her ..."

"How was the money left? Outright, or in trust till the girl reached a certain age?"

"Haven't taken that up, yet. The murder only happened last night!"

Stanley sounded hurt and cast a glance at the fair girl again as though to derive consolation from the sight of her.

“Go on, then ...”

“A lot of the chaps at the University were after Laura, as well as Free. And if the tales are right, she was a favourite with one or two of the professors as well ...”

“Good Lord!”

“Bit of a mess, isn’t it? This’ll need a bit of tactful handling, sir.”

“Will it?”

“Free’s people live in Ravelstone, too. His father’s in business on his own as local joiner, undertaker and the like. Ronald was a bright lad and won scholarships to college. His people aren’t too well off and made sacrifices for him ... They’re very cut up.”

“I’m sure they are. Was he their only one?”

“Yes. They didn’t much care for Laura, either. From what I gather, they thought she was a bit too flighty for him ... You know ... all airs and fancy dress and not much of a housewife ...”

“I see. Was she taking literature, too?”

“General Arts degree, she told me; interested in psychology as well. We’ve got a good chap on psychology here. Perhaps you’ve heard of him. Him and his wife write books ... Professor D’Arcy Lever. Classes packed-out. Gives lectures out of hours as well. Great favourite with the women. These psychology chaps usually are, aren’t they?”

“Are they? I don’t know any ...”

“Oh ... A lot of the University staff live out at Ravelstone. It’s only three miles away, you see. Pretty village. Lot of writers and artists there, too.”

“Just a minute ... Did anybody see young Free before he was killed?”

“Not as far as we know. Laura was the last to see him alive. I feel sorry for her ... A very nice girl ...”

Littlejohn imagined Stanley dispensing comfort and tact to the stricken one. Straightening his fancy tie and apologising all along the line.

The bishop and the dean had finished and were jocularly quarrelling as to who was to pay the bill. Their wives had already left them. The bishop won and departed with his colleague, dispensing smiles and unction on his way out, like a pontiff in a sacred procession.

No use trying to concentrate on the case in *The Mikado*. The local beauties passing in and out were a source of constant distraction for Stanley,

of whom Littlejohn had formed a very poor first impression. He wondered how the man had earned his promotion. Actually, the young Inspector was a graduate of Melchester himself, a very clever chemist and fingerprint man, and keen on his job. He was, at his own request, being given a turn on the outside staff. He was doing temporary duty, for the local force was decimated by 'flu.

"I think we'd better be getting along to Ravelstone, Stanley. Waitress! the bill."

"This is on me, sir."

Littlejohn wasn't disposed to quarrel about it and they left together to pick up Stanley's car from the car-park.

"Do you want to see the body, sir?"

"Not just now, thanks. We'll leave that till later."

Stanley shrugged his shoulders. All good detectives wanted to see the body. Littlejohn was a decent sort of chap personally, but as a detective ... well ...

Quite a number of others had thought that and finished on the end of a rope!

The car threaded its way through the streets of the city. They passed the police station, but as the Chief Constable was out and the Superintendent in bed with 'flu, it wasn't much use calling then. Stanley pointed out the sights of the town ... The old Corn Market, the Butter Cross, the Guildhall, the archdeacon, the dean again, and a millionaire who had come to live in a house in the cathedral close.

"And that's the local M.P. There's a big rally today ..."

Littlejohn yawned. He must get rid of Stanley soon; otherwise this conducted tour would go on for ever.

"What about my room for the night? I suppose I'll have to stay for a time ..."

Stanley grinned.

"Looks like taking a long time, this affair, sir. There's quite a fine country hotel in Ravelstone. Golfers stay there and play on the local links, which are quite good. Do you play?"

God! thought Littlejohn, I wish they'd sent somebody else on this case.

They were in the country at last. Up two hills and down again and then you could see the village of Ravelstone. Clumps of trees, farms, the church

poking its towers through the tree-tops, cottages clustered about and a number of new, red brick villas flung up irrespective of site and taste.

The air was heavy with the smell of autumn. Wood smoke, dead leaves, manure, all mixed with the smell of petrol fumes from Stanley's car, the exhaust of which seemed to leak into the interior.

"This is the Frees' place."

The car pulled up before an old brick cottage with a small garden at the front. On one side a wooden lean-to shed with a timber yard constituted the father's workshop and store. Inside the shed a stocky, red-faced man with a shock of untidy grey hair was planing wood. He was in his shirt sleeves and wore a bowler hat. He worked mechanically, seeming not to know what he was doing.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Free."

The man turned. His eyes were red-rimmed from grief and looked lifeless.

"This is Inspector Littlejohn, from Scotland Yard, who's here to help us clear-up this ghastly business."

"Pleased to meet you ..."

Old Free extended a large, hard hand automatically. There was no strength in his grip.

"What do you want? I don't feel up to talking ... Better see mother ..."

Indoors they found Mrs. Free. She had been weeping, and two other women were sitting by the kitchen fire trying to comfort her. There were empty teacups on the table.

Mrs. Free was a stiff little grey-headed woman, buxom and healthy-looking. She was in a daze and couldn't realise what had happened. Littlejohn shook hands with her.

"Will you have a cup of tea? There's some brewed. You must excuse our being in such an upset ... You see ..."

She burst into tears again.

"No, thank you, Mrs. Free.... I just wanted to say how sorry I am about all this," said Littlejohn. "I'll see you later."

The woman clung to his hand like someone drowning.

"Why? Why did they do it ...? He never hurt anybody ..."

The two attendant women gathered round and caressed and comforted the stricken one.

Stanley looked at Littlejohn and shrugged his shoulders.

"Come along, Stanley. Let's get to the hotel. If you want me, Mrs. Free, I'll be staying in the village."

"All right, Inspector. I'm sorry ..."

"You'd better meet the local bobby, if he's in."

"What about the hotel?"

Stanley gave Littlejohn a reproachful look and pulled up before a large, modernised old house with a garden abutting the road.

"Here we are."

Men in plus-fours and flannels hanging round the bar. Golf clubs lying about in the hall. Loud voices analysing the last round in the lounge. A group of men yelling their heads off at a dirty joke one of them had just told.

"Book for one night," said Littlejohn.

"Why?"

"I'll see how I like it."

"Oh, it's a good place—jolly comfortable and plenty of cheerful company."

"So I see."

The porter carried off Littlejohn's bag and he paid for a drink for Stanley. It was apparently the fashionable thing to do. Stanley seemed to know most of the men standing around. One of them wanted to tell him the dirty joke.

"Did you hear that one ...?"

"Excuse us. We're just going."

Stanley turned to Littlejohn.

"Well, what do you want to do next? Police-station? Scene of the crime? Or call on Laura Cruft? You have your own way of working, I suppose, sir. Just say the word."

"I think I'll have a wash and a snack first. You can leave me here. I want to think over things a bit."

Stanley was flummoxed.

"But—will you be doing anything after? Like me to call after tea, or I could stay and have a meal with you?"

"No, I'll be all right, thanks. I'll see you tomorrow. Give you a ring on the telephone in the morning."



“Very good, sir. I thought that perhaps ...”

“Thanks for all you’ve done, Stanley. I’ll be seeing you.”

The Melchester man went off a bit crestfallen. Littlejohn felt churlish. After all, the chap was doing his best. All the same, this parade couldn’t go on. He must work at it in his own way.

“Waiter! Could I have a sandwich in a quiet corner?”

The waiter looked astonished.

“Sorry, sir. There’s nothing till dinner. I could get you a drink. And I’m afraid all the public rooms are full of people. The golfers, you know ...”

“Oh, yes, the golfers. Right, thanks.”

Littlejohn had a wash and sought the village pub, where they found him something to eat and a glass of decent beer.

He moved there the following morning. It was quieter.

### 3.

#### **COSTAIN COLLABORATES**

*Within thy gates nothinge doeth come  
That is not passinge cleane,  
Noe spider's web, noe durt, noe dust,  
Noe filthe may there be seene.*

15TH CENTURY HYMN

P.C. COSTAIN saw Littlejohn and Stanley in the village and returned home to the police house in case they needed him. His wife was surprised to see him indoors at that time of the afternoon.

“Have you wiped your feet? What are you doin’ home at this hour?” she asked, her voice strident with curiosity and suspicion.

Costain told her.

“Oh dear! What a nuisance!” was the only reply, and Mrs. Costain, picking up dust pan, brush and polishing mop, began cleaning and tidying up like mad. Not that the place needed any more elbow grease. It was as clean as a new pin after Mrs. Costain’s earlier assaults upon it, which had lasted from seven that morning until the time when her husband made his surprise return.

But Mrs. Costain was that way. The only place where the poor bobby found any peace was in the potting-shed at the bottom of the back garden. There at least he didn’t have to take his boots off lest he scratch the linoleum or soil the carpet; he could loll and smoke in an old cast-out chair without being glared at every time he struck a match or puffed his pipe; and he could sit down without his wife finding him some fiddling job to do just

when he was settled, and shaking out the cushion with resentful violence every time he rose.

Costain was tall, thin, hatchet-faced and melancholy. Probably the sadness in his eyes and the compassion in his heart were the reasons why the villagers of Ravelstone thought so much of him. He was very popular, greatly to the annoyance of P.C. Butt, of Ditchling Episcopi, who was ambitious and officious.

He had been in the Manx police until he picked up Mrs. Costain, then a fluffy, pretty thing on a holiday. She had come from somewhere near Liverpool and couldn't bear the thought of being tucked away on an island all her life. So, Costain, in a fury of love, had agreed and transferred to the mainland. He had never got over it.

It wouldn't have been so bad if he could have looked forward to getting back to his native soil when he retired, which wasn't far away. But, no, Mrs. Costain was vociferously going back to Liverpool or nowhere. And there was P.C. Costain's old father with his nice little farm near Ballaugh, ready to turn it over to Joe when he liked.

No wonder Costain nursed in his bosom a worshipping, innocent fondness for the doctor's wife. She somehow seemed to understand his difficulties and always had a friendly word and an encouraging smile for him when they met. His love wasn't, of course, of the desperately hopeless kind that once made a man fling himself into the Seine after his first look at Monna Lisa in the Louvre. It was just a quiet, melancholy delight which added great joy to the policeman's otherwise bleak existence and caused him to burst into poetry now and again.

"Wipe your feet!" shouted Mrs. Costain.

The bobby winced as though she had struck him. Mrs. Costain was a small, dark shrew, merciless of tongue, and with none of the fluffiness of yesteryear left.

P.C. Costain hated all this yelling from room to room, and pretended not to hear.

"Are you listenin'? Wipe your feet!"

The constable began frenziedly looking for his black notebook, which he'd left at noon on the sideboard after carefully writing-up his log of last night's events.

"Where's my notebook, 'Liza?"

“Where d’you think it is? Where it ought to be, in the sideboard drawer, not lyin’ about cluttering up the place. I can never keep the house tidy.”

Sadly Costain shrugged his shoulders to himself.

“I was proceeding down Gallows Hill in the course of routine patrol. The time was 9-45 p.m....”

Slowly the bobby read over the account of his adventures.

At Ballaugh they would just be starting milking. He could hear the rattle of the buckets, the placid cows munching the hay in the stalls, the clink of his old dad’s hobnailed boots as he crossed the yard from the little white farmhouse to the cowshed. The afternoon train went past ... so leisurely. Time enough! And you could make out all the people in the carriages, and friends would wave as they went by.

“Do you hear? When are they comin’?”

“Aw. How should I know?”

“Well you needn’t get mad about it! I only asked a civil question.”

Littlejohn found P.C. Costain standing at the garden-gate waiting for him. The bobby greeted him shyly.

“You Costain? Glad to meet you. You Manx, like your name?”

“Aw, yis. Ever been to the Island, sir?”

“Yes. Once went on a case ... Man murdered on the road to Port Soderick ... Lovely place you come from. Whatever made you leave it?”

“Come in, sir. Come in.”

Costain’s cup of joy was full.

Upstairs there were sounds of brushing and dusting and moving furniture.

“Only the wife doin’ a bit o’ cleanin’,” explained the bobby.

“I just called to meet you, Costain. We’ll be seeing quite a lot of each other until this affair’s settled. Now, can you tell me exactly what occurred last night. No, don’t read it from the book. Just tell me in your own words.”

The constable told what had happened in his slow, deliberate way.

“And now, Costain, have you any ideas of your own about the affair? Motive and possible murderer, I mean.”

Costain rubbed his chin.

“Can’t say I have ezactly. Maybe it was a matter of love. Then, maybe it wasn’t. Perhaps it was money.”

“And from what the doctors say, the crime must have been committed just before you came on the spot?”

“Yes, and Miss Cruft confirms that, sir. I must have been there just a minute or two too late.”

“You neither saw nor heard anyone about?”

“No, sir.”

Littlejohn filled and lit his pipe and passed his pouch to Costain, who did the same, carefully gathering up the spent matches and throwing them on the fire. He sat on the edge of his chair like a stranger in his own home.

Upstairs all was silent. Probably *she* knew by instinct that they’d lit up, and was wondering if they were making a mess of the place!

“Love or money? Well?”

“You see, it’s this way, sir. Laura Cruft’s turned the heads of a few chaps from this village and from Melchester. Young Free’s been after her a while and seemed the favoured one of late. But she’d had one or two regulars before. F’rinstance, Tim Blaize, son of the landlord of the village pub, *The Bird in Hand*. A proper surprise when she took up with Tim. Bit of a wastrel, but good looking and got takin’ ways. Started drinkin’ heavy when she threw him over for Free ...”

“I see ...”

Costain puffed his pipe thoughtfully. He felt at home with Littlejohn and hoped they’d get about a lot together.

The road outside was bathed in sunshine, but the heavy window curtains were half drawn to prevent the light from fading the carpet. So the room was in a sort of semi-twilight.

“Were there any more before this youngster who took to drink?”

“Always somebody hangin’ round, as I said. Cars and motor bikes, too. Like a bloomin’ motor show round Apple Tree. And her that coy and haughty with ’em. I could have slapped her myself sometimes.”

“Who might have been the special favourites and likely to take her attachment to Free badly?”

“I can’t think any as would be likely to murder the lucky man. Except maybe young Tim if he were roaring drunk and didn’t know what he was at.”

“All the same, just mention a few likely names.”

“Well ... Johnny Hunter, Free’s chum at college, was doing a bit of steady courtin’ with Laura before Free cut him out. He soon seemed to get over it, though. Took to one of the other girls o’ the village. Jessie Fairfield.”

“On the rebound, would you say?”

“Maybe.”

“Was he likely to be still fond of Laura?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised. Him and young Free was cold with one another after it. In fact, Hunter kicked up a scene with Laura. Her father had to put him off the premises ...”

“H’m.”

Littlejohn looked round the room thoughtfully. You could see your own reflection in the furniture. There was a picture of a wedding group over the fireplace. It was difficult to pick out Costain as the bridegroom. He had been full-faced and ruddy then ... A clock on the mantelpiece, with a thing like a brass cheese revolving on the end of a piece of wire instead of a pendulum, struck five, and as if that were a signal, Mrs. Costain entered with a tea-tray.

The constable introduced her to Littlejohn. She smiled hesitated, shook hands, poured out two cups of tea, offered the two men buttered scones and then left them. Littlejohn put down her speedy retreat to shyness, but Costain knew that she’d got the huff because there had been smoking in her best room. He’d get the rounds of the kitchen for this!

“We’d perhaps better run round to Apple Tree Farm,” said Littlejohn when they’d finished their tea. “By the way, what were you saying about the money motive, Costain?”

“Oh ... Laura’s mother married again, that’s all. Fellow o’ the name of Spry. Laura’s money’s in trust and her mother gets the income till the girl’s twenty-five or marries, whichever’s first.”

“And you think there’s a possibility that the murder might be due to the likelihood of her marrying Free?”

“Maybe. You never know.”

“We must find that out.”

They left for the farm.

A small village. One long street and a lot of pretty side lanes, with a few cottages with good gardens along them. The main road to Melchester, well

macadamed, held a few shops and the pub. In gardens and fields beyond stood evenly-spaced bungalows and large houses set in well-kept grounds.

Typically old English, the place was ancient and intact just near the church and ruined all round its borders by indiscriminate vulgar building.

The sun was still shining brightly and the sky was wonderfully clear. There were plenty of cars on the move and parked in the street. Women shopping or gossiping, children playing, maids wheeling out perambulators or leading youngsters by the hand ...

Costain, saluting passers-by gravely, led the way. They passed a confectioner's shop crammed to the door with women and children. Outside, a placard: Ice Cream. And another: No Parking in Front of the Shop. There was a long, anxious queue at the greengrocer's, too. Grapefruit had just arrived.

They skirted a field full of fine-looking Friesian cattle. Then, Apple Tree Farm. As Costain opened the gate a sheep-dog began to bark and snarl.

"Geracher!" growled Costain, and the dog fled into his kennel.

They were busy milking. The motor of the milking machine purred and throbbed. From inside the cowsheds came the rattle of buckets, the munching and soft mooing of cattle.

P.C. Costain eyed the lot with the air of an expert. More up-to-date than his dad's place at Ballaugh, but they could keep their new-fangled contraptions and their prize herds.

A man was standing watching operations. Tall, bony, with a strong, knotted frame and a face tanned and lined by exposure to all weathers. He had a ragged moustache and a head of thick, coarse, Vandyke-brown hair. His eyes were brown, too, and shifty. He wore riding-breeches and a tweed jacket, and carried a stick. He turned sharply as footsteps approached.

"Hullo, Joe."

"Hullo, Mr. Spry. This is Inspector Littlejohn, from Scotland Yard; here on the Free case."

Spry offered his hand. The muscles of the fingers were so hard and strong that he couldn't grip properly.

"Is Miss Laura in?"

"Yes. Indoors with her mother. Had a bad shock and says she can't face folks yet. Better go in the house if you want her."

A land-girl manipulating the milking machine seemed to exasperate Spry.

“Finish ’er off by hand, dammit. How many more times have I to tell ye? There’ll be close on half a pint left in her bag.”

Ignoring the visitors, he rushed to the scene of operations and started milking the cow himself, squeezing the last drops of milk left by the machine from her udders.

The girl looked rebellious at this rebuke before strangers, and flounced off.

“Where are you goin’?”

The policemen left them quarrelling.

“Terribly bad-tempered and jumpy is Spry, sir.”

Five minutes later the Inspector and Costain were in the farmhouse.

Laura was twenty-three, they said. All the blinds of the farm were drawn in mourning, but by the light percolating into the room you could see she was a beauty. The kind that would turn men’s heads.

They had exchanged greetings, introductions and condolences, and were seated in the best room. It wasn’t like a farm interior at all. Modern furniture, good carpets, electric light with expensive fittings. Quite elegant and comfortable. Evidently Laura had taken a free hand in fitting-up the place.

Laura drew back the curtains to let in the light.

Mrs. Spry remained with them. A small, chubby woman with greying dark hair, red cheeks and bright hazel eyes. She was trying desperately to look full of sorrow at the bereavement of her daughter, but cheerfulness kept supervening and she smiled naturally when she forgot the occasion. You could see a resemblance to Laura in her face.

Laura Cruft was dressed in a green linen frock which outlined her rounded figure. She had about her an athletic sensual sinuosity, very disturbing, no doubt, to the susceptible.

A pale, oval face with a flawless complexion; difficult to know where nature ended and art began in the matter of colouring. The eyes were dark and liquid; the hair almost black with a high sheen, like that on a rook’s feathers at mating-time, and very becomingly curled close to her head.

Her mouth was small and she had used her lipstick carefully. She had the subtle smile and the air of complete self-possession of a woman who



knows she is beautiful and well able to get her own way most of the time.

"We've called about Ronald Free," said Littlejohn.

Costain looked uncomfortable, sitting on the edge of a chair as if he were at home, with his helmet on the floor beside him.

Mrs. Spry glanced at her daughter as though expecting a scene. But Laura had herself well in hand. Her pink, chubby, well-manicured hands were steady and she showed no trace of tears. Littlejohn observed the shadows under her eyes and wondered whether or not it were mascara.

Hard as nails, he thought.

"You and Mr. Free were ... er ..."

"Engaged, Inspector. We'd just become engaged before this awful thing happened."

"So nobody knew?"

"How could they? We'd not spoken to a soul about it."

There was no break in her voice; no trace of grief. She might have been rehearsing a play which needed no emotion till dress rehearsal night.

"Have you been to see Ronald's people?"

"Yes. But I left almost at once. They were far too upset to bother with questions."

"I feel the same. But I'm anxious to help all I can to find out who did this."

There was a note of impatience in Laura's voice. Littlejohn remembered that the Free family were not enamoured of their son's affair with her. They'd like her even less now.

"What was Ronald like?"

She went and brought a handbag and took out a snapshot taken with an amateur camera.

A tall, well-built young fellow, obviously posing with some amusement, lolling on the door of the cowshed of Apple Tree Farm. A shock of unruly light hair, an open-necked shirt and flannel trousers. The features were distorted by the broad grin. He looked very pleased with himself.

"There he is. He'd just got a job at a public school. He was going to get settled down and then we were to be married."

"You met at Melchester University?"

"Oh, no. We've known each other since we were kids. We both lived in the village, you know. We got better acquainted at the University."

“Are you still there?”

“No. I got my degree and left last term.”

“Going to take up teaching?”

“No. Not that. I’m at home till I can make up my mind what to do. If this hadn’t happened probably I’d have stayed at home until we got married. Now ... I don’t know what I’ll do.”

“And now will you tell me exactly what happened last night, please?”

“We went to the pictures at Melchester. Walked there and came back by bus. Ronnie came indoors to have a word with mother, then I was seeing him to the gate ...”

“What time did you leave the house?”

“It was striking nine-thirty.”

“And then?”

“Well, suddenly, Ronald asked me to marry him.”

“You agreed right away?”

For the first time she showed some animation. Her cheeks flushed. Littlejohn felt she was angry at the thought that she’d jumped at the offer.

“I’d more or less expected it. He’d tried several times to say something and then ... well ... lost his nerve or ...”

The answer was probably that his people objected, but she didn’t say it.

“So you became engaged?”

“Yes. He seemed frightfully keen about getting engaged and married as soon as we could. We stood talking about it and then he left, saying he’d see me to-morrow.”

“You were together in the garden, then, about a quarter of an hour?”

“Somewhere about that.”

“Did you hear anybody else about? Prowling round, or anything. I mean, could anyone have overheard what you were saying?”

“No. We weren’t exactly shouting it from the housetop. We were almost whispering.”

“And you left him in the garden?”

“Yes. He went down the path to the gate and I went straight indoors.”

Mrs. Spry kept looking at her daughter. She seemed as surprised as Littlejohn at Laura’s self-possession. They might have been investigating a petty theft instead of a murder.

“Could I get you anything? A cup of tea, Inspector, or a glass of beer?” said Mrs. Spry, more from want of something to say than anything else.

“No, thank you, Mrs. Spry. We must be going now. But first, I want to ask Miss Laura a rather pointed question. You needn’t answer if you don’t want, but it would help.”

“Please don’t hesitate, Inspector. I’m anxious to do all I can.”

“Had Ronald Free any rival who might have taken your attachment badly?”

Mrs. Spry caught her breath and looked wide-eyed first at Laura, then at Littlejohn.

“No,” said the girl.

And that was that.

“But you had several boy friends before him?”

She didn’t answer, but smiled a queer smile. Self-satisfied, almost coy.

Outside, Spry was shouting about the yard. Still finding fault with the land girls. Now, apparently, they were taking too long over their cups of tea.

The view from the window was lovely. The ground rose steadily to a large wood, glowing with all the tints of autumn. The first gale would bring down most of the leaves, but how they hung still and expectant, a mass of red and gold.

“It’s terrible!”

Mrs. Spry was expressing on behalf of herself and Laura their sentiments about the murder.

Laura said nothing. She was staring through the window as though waiting for someone.

Spry was still bellowing about the farmyard. Something about the milk-cooler now.

“Excuse me, I must go out to see what my husband wants. Are you ...?”

“We must be going, thank you, Mrs. Spry.”

Costain picked up his helmet and put it on and they all went out together.

## 4.

### THE RIVAL CAMP

*“You are thought here to be the most senseless and fit man for the constable of the watch; therefore bear you the lantern. This is your charge: you shall comprehend all vagrom men; you are to bid any man stand, in the prince’s name.”*

*“How if ’a will not stand?”*

*“Why then, take no note of him ...”*

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

P.C. WILLIAM BUTT of Ditchling Episcopi nursed in his bosom a burning jealousy of Joseph Costain. Only recently had their villages been amalgamated for patrol purposes. An outbreak of robberies had made it necessary for a constable to be on duty by night as well as day.

Butt was an enormous, red-faced man, heavy-footed and always in a sweat. People preferred the quiet, melancholy Costain to him, which was wormwood and gall to Butt, who wanted to earn his stripes first.

On the night of the murder, there was quite a domestic scene in the Ditchling police house. Mrs. Butt was still up and about in spite of the late hour. She received without enthusiasm the partridges which the gods had flung into her husband’s arms.

“He’s in another of his do’s,” she said right away to her husband when he entered, full of murder, partridges and jealousy for his lucky colleague at Ravelstone.

“Why, it’s not cold,” replied the bobby, forgetting the many things he had on his mind and entering into the dialogue. He then plonked himself

down heavily and began to demolish a pork pie and a bottle of beer which were waiting for him.

“Well ... He’s at it again, cold or no cold. Shoutin’ the place down for ham ... and tea and jelly. As if he didn’t get enough food! I won’t stand it ... He’ll ’ave to go to the workhouse or else I’ll go out ’o me mind ...”

P.C. Butt took a large mouthful of beer to swill down his pie and clear a way for speech.

“’Ow many times have I to tell yer, mother? It’s not the ’am what you eat that he’s botherin’ about ... It’s the ’am in the Bible ...”

“Ham! My son, Ham ...”

Loud shouts from the upper room interrupted Butt’s heavy exposition.

Mr. Nehemiah Butt, aged eight-four, father of William, was on the warpath. Cold weather always gave him one of his bad bouts. Hunger, lack of clothes on his bed and the effects of low temperatures on his brain periodically gave him the idea that he was Noah. Thereupon, he imagined that his son Charlie, who lived in distant parts as a matter of policy and who refused to give the old fellow house room, was Ham and had taken away all his clothes and publicly mocked him. P.C. Butt, in the role of Shem, received his perpetual blessings.

In his lucid hours, Old Butt talked about P.C. William behind his back, poured scorn on his constabulary acumen, and accused him of harbouring him merely for the money he expected under his Will. In truth, Nehemiah hadn’t a bean except his old-age pension and a life policy for £200, without profits, which, owing to his persistent and impecunious survival, had already cost William £250 in premiums.

Old man Butt had once been a Roman Catholic and until the imminent arrival of the distant Charlie had forced him hastily to lead the late Mrs. Nehemiah to the altar, he had toyed with the idea of entering the priesthood. He had, therefore, a smattering of ecclesiastical Latin, which his subsequent conversion to the faith of the Seventh Day Resters, who attended chapel all week and stayed in bed all day on Sundays, had not driven from his system.

He occupied a large garret at the top of the house and had filled his lair from floor to ceiling, cram-jam, with furniture inherited from one after another of his three sisters and seven brothers who had predeceased him.

P.C. Butt found his sire sitting up in bed, barricaded in by easy chairs, sideboards, commodes, whatnots and marble-topped washstands. The

bobby had to perform a series of knights' and bishops' moves and clamber over a row of Gladstone bags, also legacies from the brothers Butt and each bearing the initials of the deceased owner. P.B., J.H.B., H.B., M.B., F.X.B., and so on ... Like a graveyard.

*"Benedicte! Deducant te angeli,"* said Old Butt. His face was covered in a froth of snow-white beard, which reminded you of the milk boiling over, and his thin, silky, grey hair stood on end. His cheeks were flushed with delirium and enthusiasm. He looked like one of the prophets of old depicted by Gustave Dorè.

"Jelly?" puffed P.C. Butt.

"Ham! Bring my son Ham that I may curse him. He has uncovered me and mocked me ..."

"Get to sleep, father; 'ere, I'll put this rug over your feet."

P.C. Butt in desperation picked up a mat from a pile of carpets and squares, also willed to Old Butt by his departed relatives, and flung it across his parent's bed. It was a praying-mat brought by Francis-Xavier Butt from Ramoth-Gilead and seemed to do the trick.

*"Benedicte!"* said the old man and fell asleep right away.

P.C. Butt was deeply disappointed. Unlike his unfilial brothers in the rest of England, he thought the world of his father. To him the old chap was a perfect oracle. He consulted him earnestly whenever he was in difficulties. For young Butt's mind ground slow without the advantage of doing it exceeding small, whereas, on the other hand, that of his sire, in spite of his great age, was keen and active. Especially after one of his do's. It was as though the rush of blood to the head lubricated his brains for some time afterwards.

"I wanted a word with the ole man," said Butt to his wife when he got downstairs again. "Wanted his advice badly. Young Free's bin murdered to-night and Costain looks like makin' all the runnin' if I don't do somethin' quick. Always was lucky, was Costain ..."

"Murder? Ow!" said Mrs. Butt. She was a tall, stringy woman who resembled a horse. Long face, large, protruding teeth, loose, heavy jaw, cavernous nostrils and large, melting kindly eyes. The finishing touch would have been a straw bonnet with holes for her ears and tassels hanging over her brow ...

“Murder? Ow!” said Mrs. Butt, raising her hands and forearms like a Muezzin calling the faithful to prayer, and uttering little screams. It was a way she had of showing she was interested yet terrified and needing male protection.

“Yes. I’ll tell yer about it in the mornin’, Cora. I’m asleep on me feet now ... Been ’ard at it since ten o’clock. So let’s be getting up to bed.”

Feeling keenly the honour Providence had done her in uniting her with such a man, the discoverer of murderers and punisher of wrong-doers, Mrs. Butt rapidly pulled out a number of hairpins and let down her hair, which was a sign that the curtain was being lowered on another day’s work.

In the morning Nehemiah Butt was himself again and appeared at his son’s bedside at five minutes to six. After his do’s he always rose early and full of beans. Mrs. Butt had heard him extricating himself from among his various legacies at just after five o’clock, so had risen and greeted him with the news of the crime.

Old Butt shook the sleeping form of his son.

“Get up,” he shouted angrily. “Skulkin’ abed when murder’s afoot.”

P.C. Butt, who had only had three hours’ sleep, did not respond at once. He was a sound sleeper, for in his childhood he had been brought up in a house adjoining the private zoo of an eccentric nobleman, who employed his father. Nurtured amid the nightly roars of hungry lions, the howls of tigers and other large cats, the chattering of monkeys and the shrieks of parrots and exotic birds, Will Butt had been rendered immune from anything humans might try in the way of disturbing his sleep. Nehemiah Butt’s voice, which resembled that of a furious old baboon, had no effect on his offspring, and he needed to seize his son by the throat and shake him before he could elicit any reaction.

“Ow! Ow! Leggo ... Oh, it’s you, is it?”

At first, P.C. Butt thought the Ravelstone strangler was at it again.

“Wot’s this about murder, me boy? Tell me all, from beginnin’ to end ...”

“Gimme a chance. I ’aven’t had me sleep out yet. Didn’t get in till three ...”

The constable’s hair was on end from the initial shock of being roughly roused and his curly moustache looked as though he had knitted it himself from black wool and stuck it on his upper lip awry.

“Never mind that. While there’s a murderer at large you oughter neether slumber nor sleep. *Festina Lente*. That’s Latin for get a move on, an’ that oughter be yore motter for this case. Costain’ll get all the credit else.”

The mention of his rival’s name was like a shock from an electric battery to P.C. Butt. He was up in one and drawing on his trousers before the old man could breathe again.

“Yore always right, dad.”

“Course I am. *Semper Eadem*. Latin for always right, that is.”

Old Butt spent a lot of time learning the mottoes on the bits of china, presents from here, there and everywhere, and bearing the coats-of-arms of their places of origin, left to him in their Wills by his defunct sisters.

In his haste to get his tunic, P.C. Butt pulled the clothes rack, plugged into the wall, clean from its moorings. His father had only made and fixed it a few days earlier.

“Look wot you done now, clumsy duck,” chided his sire.

Nehemiah was the handyman of the home. Always doing useful jobs about the place in record time. The whole of the downstairs sideboard had collapsed after his efforts at easing one of the castors, and the coal shed he had erected in the spring and painted bright green had disintegrated at the first breath of wind and thereafter looked like a piece of bomb damage. He was toying with the idea of repairing the roof of the police house before winter set in and his son had, in consequence, almost gone on his bended knees to the county authorities to send a professional on the job, lest the worst should happen to him and his.

“Tell me all, now. I’m all ears, so go on ...”

P.C. Butt, whose parent hung on him even whilst he shaved, washed, and cleaned his boots, got it all off his chest spasmodically.

The meeting of Costain after hearing his whistle ... The body ... The partridges ... What Dr. and Mrs. Gell had said and done.

“An’ now, they’ve sent for Scotland Yard and Costain, like as not, ’ll be workin’ with whoever comes from London. Allus was lucky, Joe Costain.”

“Costain’s got Scotland Yard, ’as he? Well, you got *me*, see, son? Good as any Scotland Yard chap, I am.”

“H’m,” said Butt the younger without enthusiasm.

“You do as yer told and you’ll soon see. Now, first thing is, you go an’ examine the spot, see? Specially where those partridges were ... They’s



some connection between those partridges and the crime, I'll be bound. Those birds 'ad their necks wrung, didn't they? And what did the corpse 'ave? Tell me that."

"What *did* he 'ave?"

"*His* neck wrung."

Old Butt delivered this amazing piece of news with the gravity of an oracle.

"Now go right away and examine where you found them birds. An' then walk up the road, seeking out in the highways an' byeways, and find if they's traces of anyone hidin' ... lyin' in wait for the victim, see? Get off with you!"

"Me breakfast," whined P.C. Butt despairingly.

"Leave that for the time bein'. You can eat an' enjoy it when you done what you oughter."

So the dutiful P.C. did as he oughter and set out on a tour of inspection.

Costain was nowhere to be seen, so Butt got on with his job unhampered and without embarrassment.

First he pondered over the scene of the crime, already photographed, scoured for clues and generally trampled over by experts from Melchester, who were now having breakfast at the village inn. There was a young constable on guard at the spot and he greeted Butt distantly, like a city man condescending to a country cousin. There were a number of village urchins there, too, vividly re-enacting the murder by strangling each other and tying rope and twine around one another's necks. One small boy was black in the face under the digital pressure of a larger lad on his windpipe.

"'Ere, be off, you lot!" roared Butt, flailing the air with his arms and charging here and there trying to box the ears of the offenders. He was in a furious temper at finding his pitch queered by interlopers. He caught the smallest and least offensive of them a resounding blow in the middle of the back which propelled him about twenty yards along the road and almost unseated Mr. Turncote, who was starting off on his bike in search of eggs for his brood. The vicar did not notice what was going on, but righted his machine from its violent wobble and went on his way like one in a dream. He had left some chops cooking in the oven and was calculating to what extent they would be done by the time he had circulated round the local farms.

The young constable clicked his teeth at his elder colleague's behaviour, and the rabble of youngsters gathered round their offended pal, now howling his head off, and escorted him home. There it was proposed to report the assault to his mother, a violent woman, in the hope that she would take reprisals on the unlucky Butt.

"I'm not stoppin'," said Butt to the other bobby. "Got me rounds to do. S'long ..."

Looking here and there, like an actor who has forgotten his lines and vainly seeks the prompter, Butt made an undignified get-away and sought shelter down a by-path known as Lovers' Lane, the thick, high hedges and mossy banks of which encouraged erotic goings-on after dark and gave rise to its highly original name.

"Ar," said Butt to himself profoundly, and looked about him.

Here and there along Lovers' Lane there were gaps in the hedge, broken by those who, seeking solitude from the amorous crowds who gathered there in the mating season, preferred to reduce the nation's food stocks by cuddling in the corn behind. The farmer, intent on the Augean task of preventing love from finding a way, but not to the extent of sitting out with a gun all night, had woven a complicated net of barbed wire in each of the gaps.

P.C. Butt, spotting the prints of large feet with feathers framing them in one of these alcoves, halted to let his brains slowly grind.

"Har," he said to himself with emphasis.

He was countryman enough to perceive the roosting spot of a covey of partridges in the stubble behind the gap and to recognise the feathers as part of the slaughter.

"Har."

He looked at the impressions of big feet, turned over the feathers with a huge forefinger, and regarded the treacherous wire profoundly. Goaded by passion, lovers had wrenched a hole in the net of barbs through which to squeeze their nimble ways to their couch of corn. Hanging from one of the ugly points was a small triangle of blue serge. P.C. Butt detached it from its moorings and put it in his cigarette case, which was an elegant two-ounce tobacco tin with all the paint worn off by constant use. Extracting a small cigarette therefrom, the bobby inserted it in his large face, looked all around to make sure he was not spied upon, and lit up.

For five minutes Butt pondered his latest find amid a cloud of smoke and a number of assaults from his smoker's cough. His mind refused to throw up any solution whatever, so he decided to consult his parent.

Nehemiah Butt was furiously erecting a hen-cote which looked ready to fall upon and flatten the first birds venturing over the threshold. He listened to his son's account of his morning's work with a face plainly registering astonishment that he should have begotten such a numbskull.

"And you calls yerself a constable and you carn't see what that means?"

"No, dad. What does it mean? Like as not some lad torn his coat cuddlin' his girl."

And he smirked at the thought of it.

"Yew ... yew ... To think yore a responsible police officer! You never seen cloth as good as this 'ere on the back of any village lad as needed to use Lovers' Lane fer his hammerous designs.... No. Look at yer own tunic and learn a lesson from it."

"I don't get yer, dad. Really I don't."

"Well, I'll be danged!"

Whereupon Old Butt thumped the side of the hen roost so violently that the whole structure fell to pieces and collapsed in an untidy heap of firewood.

"Now look what you done, and me spent a good two hours puttin' this together. Well, you can put it together agen yerself. Speakin' o' that there piece o' cloth, don't you see, duffer, who killed those partridges wot you found?"

"Can't say I do."

"Look 'ere. One: near where the body was found last night yew found them birds. Two: near the body yew finds a certain person dressed in blue serge.... No, don't interrupt. Three: near where them birds bin roostin' and bin killed yew finds a piece o' serge torn from wot? Why, a policeman's tunic or pants ..."

"Costain!! He done it?"

"Course he done it. Plain as the nose on yer face. Now you got 'im. Policeman infringin' the game laws ... found out ... drummed out o' the force. And yew left in charge o' the case with the Scotland Yard chap. An' with me to be behind yew, yore made, William, yore made."

"I'm off right away, dad, to report this."

P.C. Butt performed a grotesque dance in his excitement, thereby causing a cold frame, erected two days before by his sire, to collapse with a sound of shattering glass.

“Don’t be a bee fool,” roared his father. (The Seventh Day Resters never swear in full). “Yew gotta get more proof yet. Nice howdedoo you’d be in if Costain gave an alibi. No. Yew got to see them trousers or that tunic as he tore. Then you got ’im.”

The church clock struck twelve.

“I’ve had no food, except a cup o’ tea, since I got up,” complained Butt.

“Yew oughter forget yore silly appetites and sich like till you settled this,” remarked Old Nehemiah, regarding the roof of the house with an expert eye. “I’ll make a start on that roof if it’s fine to-morrow.”

After lunch, P.C. Butt went back to the village, hunting for Costain. He hoped to meet his colleague and under the guise of examining his uniform in the course of a discussion about the need for a new one of his own, find out the truth of old Butt’s deductions.

But Costain was nowhere in sight. Instead, a queue of women, waiting in front of the fish-shop, started to bait Butt. The fishmonger, who also sold fruit, vegetables and tripe, received his fish at about ten in the morning. He then spent two hours behind closed doors, whetting the shoppers’ appetites by arranging his goods in the window and ostentatiously making up parcels of it for the gentry and other favourites. Then he went to his dinner at noon and stayed until two-thirty. By three o’clock he was ready for business, which consisted of selling the best cuts to those who took as well two or three pounds of carrots, sprouts or other prevailing vegetables, and dishing out the coarse remnants to the ones who refused.

It was half-past-two when Butt passed the infuriated fish-shop queue and they were in prime condition for setting about him with a will.

There has always been deadly enmity between Ditchling and Ravelstone since the peasants of the former refused to team-up with the latter for the Peasants’ Revolt in 1381. Annual cricket contests always end in bodyline and bloodshed; rival villagers regard each other’s gardens and hen-runs as legitimate places for raid and pillage by night; if a Ditchling lad gets a Ravelstone girl into trouble, or vice versa, he is treated as having scored a point in the eternal contest; and if, in spite of universal pressure, a Ditchlinger marries a Ravelstonian, the marriage is regarded as not having

taken place at all and the parties are forced to live in sin outside the boundaries of the offended parishes.

Butt, regarded as a spy and interloper and as the embodiment of all the villainy and seduction of Ditchling Episcopi, was legitimate prey. One of more imagination and less stubborn fibre would have kept away.

Several women made noises usually expressed in print by Humph, Pshaw, Tut-tut and \*\*\*, as he passed, red of face and heavy of foot.

“Hush, here comes the bogey man!”

“Look what the cat’s brought in to catch the murderer!”

“Make way for the big-shot sleuth!”

Verbal brickbats failed to penetrate Butt’s thick carapace, however.

But at length came the last bitter shaft.

“Joe Costain was up and solved it all while you was asleep in yer bed. No flies on Joe! Three cheers for Joe Costain, who doesn’t need any dirty Ditchlinger to ’elp him.”

Butt saw red.

“Yew keep civil tongues in yer ’eads or I’ll take yer names fer obstructin’ in the discharge o’ duty.”

There were loud hoots of derisive laughter, which added fuel to the now roaring fire of William’s wrath.

“Solved it, ’as he? Yore wonderful Joe hasn’t solved anythin’, see? I solved it.”

In his blind fury Butt mixed up who had choked Free and who had throttled the partridges.

“In my pocket I got evidence as’ll convict one o’ yew Ravelstone clever-Dicks o’ the crime. Wait till to-night when I’m off duty and call on the Chief Constable. That’ll make some of yer sit up. When you hear it, you’ll not hold up yer heads again for many a long day. Yew and yore Joe Costain...”

Here P.C. Butt deemed it meet to beat as dignified a retreat as he could manage, for, in the distance, he could make out Mrs. Lillywhite, mother of the boy he had battered earlier that day, and her very walk told she was on the warpath. If she joined and made common cause with the women of the fish queue, the fate of Orpheus would be nothing compared with his. So he hurried home to Ditchling by secret paths, there to meditate on the awful fate awaiting Joe Costain that night.

Old Butt was already on the roof removing some slates, but his son was too occupied to notice him. Shutting himself in the front-room, P.C. William Butt wrote out a long report in his best handwriting on several sheets of foolscap.

“In the course of my duties this a.m., I passed down Lovers’ Lane ...”

Was it officially known as Lovers’ Lane? He looked on the Ordnance Map, but there it had no name at all. Butt decided to call at the nearest farm and make proper enquiries. It wouldn’t do to make an ass of himself with the Chief.

It was dark outside when Butt set out to confirm that Lovers’ Lane really was what it had been called by gentry and serfs alike since Domesday Book. He had left a space in his voluminous manuscript and would insert the proper description after confirming it. Then he would get the bus to Melchester and denounce Costain.

As he climbed Gallows Hill he seemed to hear footsteps behind him, but when he halted to make sure, either the steps halted or didn’t exist at all.

Butt felt light-hearted. This would finally settle the long internecine strife in the local constabulary. Costain’s luck would fail him this time.

Butt smiled to himself in the dark, and, raising his huge paws, slapped them together and rubbed them in glee.

Before he could lower his arms again something hit him on the back of the neck. As he reeled forward, bewildered and dazed, his fall was broken by a tight, searing grip on his throat.

In his young days P.C. Butt, trained by his autocratic parent, had been a bit of a wrestler. With flashing lights before his eyes from the throttling grip, he made a last effort, seized his assailant and performed the feat known as “the flying mare.” A dark body whirled over the constable’s shoulder and hit the grass bank at the roadside with a thud.

Butt, with a last gigantic effort, released the murderous cord, gulped in air and staggered to the attack again. A shoe caught him a sickening blow on the jaw and he remembered nothing more.

The vicar of Ravelstone, carrying a black-market boiling-fowl to his hungry family under cover of night, stumbled over the body of Will Butt. The cord was tied round the officer’s throat again. He was black in the face. Hastily, the Rev. Tancred Turncote took out the penknife which he always

kept sharp for household duties, and cut the twine. His hand trembled so much that he could hardly focus his torch on the scene of operations.

Butt came to himself in Dr. Gell's dining-room. P.C. Costain was supporting him by the shoulders as he lay on the couch. The doctor was putting on his jacket after a bout of strenuous artificial respiration, and Littlejohn, who had been taking a turn, too, was still in his shirt sleeves. The vicar was standing by, holding a fowl head downwards by its legs, and blinking.

Will Butt looked at Costain's solicitous, melancholy face and smiled. He gurgled something and then ... two large tears formed and ran down his cheeks.

"Joe!" he gasped, and made a great effort to open his tunic and find the incriminating report, which he now wanted to throw in the fire. He withdrew his empty hand, for there was nothing there.

"Gone ..." he gurgled, and fainted.

Whilst all this was happening to his son, Nehemiah Butt was being taken in the ambulance to Melchester General Hospital. He had fallen through the roof of the police station into his own bedroom and, striking his head on the marble top of one of his legacies, had rendered himself unconsciousness. When he recovered the following morning he found his son sleeping in the next bed in the ward. He made as if to spring from his own and assault the slumbering William.

"Wot you doin' 'ere, yew silly bee? Wot the bee haitch ...?"

But P.C. William Butt slept on, immunised by his youthful training among wild animals and their cries.

The firm hand of a nurse pressed old Butt back under the clothes and soon he, too, was snoring.

## 5.

### UNCLE JONAS

*I pass like night from land to land;  
I have strange power of speech;  
The moment that his face I see  
I know the man that must hear me;  
To him my tale I teach.*

COLERIDGE

COSTAIN had routine work to do, so he and Littlejohn parted at the door of the Golf Hotel. Inside, the Inspector found them hard at dinner. A few residents sedately eating at their own tables; a quiet pair or two of diners-out; and the rest golfers, most of them vociferously analysing their last rounds, jesting heavily with one another or shouting from table to table making arrangements for the evening's entertainment. Many of them were too busy showing-off to notice the tepid, glutinous soup, the fish lost in sauce, and the jam roll which, described as baked, seemed toasted hard and soaked in the same white sauce only sugared and minus parsley.

Littlejohn ploughed his way disconsolately through the meal, determined to move across the way first thing in the morning. Behind him a Jew and a Gentile, evidently in partnership, were dining and discussing the business of the past day.

"I told him I'd pay him three quid, cash on the nail, for every turkey he could let me have ..."

"Good! Did he bite?"

"Yes. They'll raise a fiver apiece at you know where. I got some eggs and chickens, too. He didn't want to play at first, but, as I said, a quid per



bird, unplucked, isn't to be sneezed at, and a penny an egg more than Board price ... He saw sense."

"Good! Good! Nice work!"

"I asked him what he'd take for the whole farm, cash down ..."

Here, the manager of the place approached Littlejohn, apparently eager concerning his comfort and well-being. A thick-set, red-faced, smooth fellow, with protruding eyes which, in his anxiety to miss nothing, he couldn't keep still. He was dressed in a natty blue suit, with shirt, collar, tie and socks to match.

"Quite comfortable, Inspector?" asked the manager, his eyes roving like those of a ventriloquist's dummy.

The red-faced Gentile turned pale and the swarthy, bronzed Jew changed to mustard colour. They looked at each other quickly, two minds thought alike, and, leaving their fish half-eaten and their Burgundy in the bottle, they made for the open air and off into the night as fast as their flashy car and its black-market petrol would bear them.

Littlejohn had explained to Costain the difficulties of questioning the stricken Free family so soon after the tragedy. But he must have information as soon as possible.

"If I was you, sir, I'd try Mr. Jonas Buffet."

"Who?"

"Mr. Jonas Buffet, sir. Uncle of young Free; 'is mother's brother. Both Mr. and Mrs. Free is shy people and won't talk much. But Mr. Buffet'll talk the hind leg off a mule. Nice gentleman, as used to run a broker's shop in Melchester till he retired. It's said he found some o' the money for Ronald's schooling. Young Free was often at his house and, I think, sort of confided in his uncle. The very man for you, I'd say, sir."

"Where's he to be found, Costain?"

"Last of the row of four cottages just between here and the station. You can't miss it. Keep on the same side as this 'otel."

"I may call after dinner, then."

"Like as not he'll be in, unless he's at his sister's helping them, like, in their trouble. But I shouldn't think he'll be out. His late partner, Mr. Habakkuk, calls every night for a glass o' grog and a game o' chess or draughts. I can't see them breakin' up their meetin' even for a murder."

"Mr. Habakkuk, eh?"

“Yes. Mr. Abednigo Habakkuk—Abe for short. Talk to Jonas as if Abe wasn’t there, sir, if you’ll take my advice. Very discreet, is Mr. ’abakkuk, and can be talked in front of.”

So, after his dinner, Littlejohn made for Mr. Buffet’s cottage and wasn’t long in finding it. There was no garden; the door gave straight on to the street. Littlejohn knocked on the bright brass knocker.

“Come in,” called a loud, fruity voice. “Mind the step!”

The warning was timely, for the living-room was below street level and you had to go down a step. A gust of warm, rum-laden air greeted the detective.

A large room, furnished from the pickings of Mr. Buffet’s late trade. Thick carpet on the floor. A solid mahogany sideboard and a heavy dining-table to match. A few Heppelwhite-style chairs here and there. Two walls covered with books; the remaining two ornamented with Baxter prints. The place was spotlessly clean, roomy and expensively simple.

A large log fire, stifling in its intensity, burned in the open grate. Before it, on a table, a bottle of rum, two glasses, a tobacco jar and a box of snuff. On each side of the table, and facing the fire, two large, cosy wing-chairs, round which two faces appeared and scrutinised the Inspector.

“Mr. Buffet?” asked Littlejohn.

One of the faces glowed and nodded.

Mr. Buffet was a stocky, thick-set man with a square, craggy, clean-shaven face, thick white hair and eyebrows, and blue eyes. His face was criss-crossed with fine lines and deep grooves ran from his nose to each corner of his mouth. He looked carved from knotty oak.

The face on the other side of the fireplace was small, angular and delicately made. There was something whimsical about it and it reminded you of port wine. The chin and nose were small and pointed, the mouth large and brimming over with teeth, and the eyes cloudy grey and twinkling.

There was a very strong bond of attachment between these one-time business partners. When they were together in the shop Mr. Buffet had earned most of the money whilst Mr. Habakkuk kept up his partner’s morale by talking philosophy and cricket to him.

Habakkuk’s only hobby besides chess, draughts, omniverous reading, theoretical cricket, writing to the papers and collecting flints, china and

coins, was scientific back-gardening. In this he was a supreme optimist. He regularly sowed pomegranates, pineapples, melons, oranges, lemons, passion fruit and tobacco. None of them came up. But he hoped for success before death came upon him. Judging from his silky white hair and feeble gait, he and his seeds would have to hurry up.

When Littlejohn disturbed the sitting of these two old friends, Habakkuk had been comforting the mourning Buffet with success. He had changed the tears of his companion to smiles of consolation. Not by his philosophical outpourings, however, for Mr. Habakkuk had read so much philosophy that he had got it all mixed up and never held forth without attributing sayings of Plato to Confucius and pearls from Descartes with gems from Rupert Roderick Smee, author of *Power Cables to the Infinite* and *Telephone Messages to Heaven*, but by uttering the names of cricketers of the past, many of whose photographs hung over the fireplace. He had just said "Remember W. G. Grace, Ranjitsinhji, Archie Maclaren, Victor Trumper, F. R. Spofforth, Gilbert Jessop? Remember?"

And, like some incantation, those magic names had brought comfort to Jonas Buffet's stricken heart. They were just going to recite another abracadabra and set about a lot of ancient score-sheets with shining eyes when Littlejohn butted-in.

"Do you remember Archie Maclaren?" said Mr. Habakkuk to Littlejohn.

"Rather!" said the Inspector, somewhat taken aback, but rising to the occasion. "I used to be on police duty at Old Trafford in days gone by. Wilfred Rhodes; Emmott Robinson; Whit Monday; August Bank Holiday."

"George Hirst ... C. B. Fry ..."

They got out some beer for Littlejohn, who detested rum, and held a three-quarter-hour cricket session before Littlejohn remembered what he had called for.

"Of course I'll do all I can to help you trace who's done this wretched thing," said Mr. Buffet, in reply to Littlejohn's question.

Mr. Habakkuk thought he ought to add a few words of philosophy to keep up his friend's spirits.

"'There is no cure for birth and death save to enjoy the interval,' as Descartes said," he muttered.

"That was Santayana, not Descartes, Abe, and most inappropriate at this juncture," replied his friend politely.

“Santayana? Of course, of course. What am I thinking of ...?”

Littlejohn decided to put a stop to this bandying of wisdom.

“You were, I understand, fully in the confidence of your nephew, Mr. Buffet.”

“Yes, Inspector, until latterly. You see, I ventured to say I hardly thought Miss Cruft suitable for him. After all, the girl had tried out half the eligibles in the village and broken previous engagements. I didn’t want his career to suffer. Besides, a man wants a helpmeet as a wife, not a burden on his back. Ronald rather resented it. Naturally, I suppose, being in love. He got a bit reserved with me after.”

“‘There are three things which are too wonderful for me, yea four ... the way of a man with a maid’—Ecclesiastes, thirty, eighteen,” said Mr. Habakkuk softly and solemnly.

“Proverbs! And not quite appropriate,” said Littlejohn.

It was becoming a sort of game.

“Could you tell me, Mr. Buffet, something about this Miss Cruft and her association with your nephew? It would be very helpful.”

Littlejohn turned to Mr. Buffet, and Mr. Habakkuk shrank into his chair pondering his misquotation to himself, his lips moving noiselessly.

“Of course. Where shall I begin?”

“Did Ronald talk about her and her other affairs?”

“Yes, until we disagreed about his own association with her. Abe, get us a bit of supper, that’s a good chap. Cold mutton in the meat safe.”

Mr. Habakkuk’s face lit up and he set about his task with a will, thus removing for a short time the interruption of his random philosophising.

“You’ve been a good friend to your nephew for a long time, sir?”

“Yes. Since I settled down here particularly. About ten years ago. He used to call about every other night. Told me about his studies, and when he started to look at the girls he used to tell me about them, too. Why, I don’t know. Probably wanted to open his heart to somebody and found me the best listener. He’d had one or two special girl friends before he took up with Laura.”

“But none of them likely to have turned murderous if he threw them over?”

“Oh, no, no, no. All nice girls, who promptly found consolation with some other man, I guess.”

“Was there any profound attachment to any of them before the Laura Cruft affair?”

“Not to any of the young ones. No. But there was a bit of a friendship between Ronald and Muriel Paget, wife of Hilary Paget, the author chap who lives down the village. The pair of them must have met somewhere, and, as they were both interested in French literature, they got friendly. She seemed to be getting a bit keen on the boy, although I’d guess she’d be about ten years older. He told me about it and I advised him gently to drop her. I think he did. At least, I’ve not heard anything more about it.”

“Did her husband know?”

“I couldn’t say. If he did, I don’t suppose he’d mind. He’s a queer bird and fond of the women if what I hear’s right. Spends a lot of time at his London flat....”

“I see.”

“Have you any chutney, Buffet?” came plaintively from the scullery. “I can’t stand mutton without something of the kind.”

“You’ll find some on the larder window-sill.”

Mr. Habakkuk could be heard rummaging among bottles and then appeared with a tray laden with the first instalment of a supper. He laid the cloth and set the dishes and hurriedly pattered out for more.

“You’ll stay for a bite, Inspector? Now I won’t take no.”

“Very well, sir, thank you. Good of you, I’m sure. Now, did Ronald ever confide in you about Laura Cruft’s past?”

“Oh, yes. Until he talked seriously about marrying her, I used to listen without comment. He seemed to want to talk about her and I’d no objections.”

“Can you give me some details?”

“Yes. They’d known each other since they were kids. Both bred in this village. Started at the village school together, travelled on the same bus when they went to high schools in Melchester, and met at parties and such like. Ronald seemed to get keen when they both got together at Melchester University.”

“Shall I make some coffee, Buffet?”

“Yes, yes, yes, Abe. Let the Inspector see how good you are at it. What was I saying? Oh, yes. According to Ronnie, quite a lot of the fellows at

Melchester were keen on Laura. He and she weren't taking the same courses, but they had some common ground."

"Anybody in particular mentioned among the Melchester undergraduates, sir?"

"Young Johnny Hunter was the only one in particular. He was knocking around with Laura before Ronnie. Then she threw Johnny over for Ronnie and Johnny took up with one of the girls in the village."

"Was that all?"

"Among the younger end, yes. Nothing serious otherwise. But one of the professors got very friendly with her. Expect she was flattered by it, for he's a man with an international reputation. Chap called Lever—D'Arcy Lever—a psychologist."

"Dear me!"

"You may well say it. He's sixty if he's a day. Laura was one of his students. He got bringing her home regularly in his car when his wife wasn't with him. His wife's in his department at the university, too. Clever woman, who has him under her thumb, from what I hear. The professor was seen having tea with Laura in cafés and such places very regularly. It was rumoured that she was going to be his private secretary when she'd graduated. Then it all fizzled out. I guess Mrs. D'Arcy Lever had heard of it and applied the closure."

"Very interesting. How long ago was this?"

"Three or four months since. Just before Laura started seriously with Ronnie."

"I'd better look into this."

Mr. Habakkuk emerged with more supplies, including a most succulent-looking cold leg of mutton and a coffee pot. He bore the latter like a chalice full of holy fluid.

"Now! All ready," he said, and they drew up chairs and fell to.

"You're not upsetting him, I hope, Inspector. He's taken this badly and I wouldn't like him bothering."

"No, no, Abe. It's all right," said Buffet, tackling his mutton and salad.

"Remember what I told you, 'Une indifférence paisible est la plus sage des vertus,' as Montaigne says."

"If you'll stop gibbering in foreign tongues, I'll be able to tell you whether you're wrong or not."

“‘Peaceful indifference is the wisest of the virtues’.”

“That’s Anatole France, not Montaigne.”

“Of course. Whatever’s the matter with me tonight?”

“You’re more upset than I am, Abe.”

Mr. Habakkuk seemed deeply moved either by his mistake or his friend’s solicitude and applied himself to his food without speaking again for some time.

“So,” said Littlejohn to Mr. Buffet, “as regards the love angle of the affair, we have the following concerned: Tim Blaize, of *The Bird in Hand*, who took to drink after he’d been jilted....”

“Yes,” muttered Buffet, putting down his glass of Burgundy and nodding his head. “I ought to have remembered Tim. It was the talk of the village. He soon found consolation with other girls, but not of a permanent kind, I gather. He’s still philandering about here, there and everywhere. Not a very nice character.”

“And then there’s Johnny Hunter, you mentioned ...”

“Yes. Johnny. Quite harmless. Decent boy.”

“And the affair with Mrs. Paget. That might have gone farther than most people thought.”

“Yes. It might have done. She might take the rôle of the woman scorned, although it’s rather straining the imagination to think so.”

“Maybe. Yes. And, finally, Miss Cruft and the professor.”

Mr. Habakkuk poured out the coffee and Buffet brought out the cigars.

Littlejohn wondered if these two epicures regaled themselves in this fashion every night. He also wondered where the excellent leg of mutton had come from. Certainly not from the butcher’s on the ration. In these country places maybe there were secret sources of supply.

They took their coffee and drew up to the fire again. It was getting on for nine. Time seemed to pass slowly in this quiet retreat. Even the pendulum of the fine grandfather’s clock in the corner seemed to hang fire between the ticks.

“So much for the love angle,” said Littlejohn at length.

The two old men looked at him surprised, as though suddenly torn from thoughts of other and better things back to the unpleasant realities of the present.

“Yes, I think so,” replied Mr. Buffet.

The ash on his cigar broke and scattered itself down his waistcoat. Mr. Habakkuk had been taking snuff and sat like one petrified enjoying the sensation and wondering whether or not he would sneeze.

“There’s another aspect, too, I believe,” added Littlejohn, dusting ash from his own pants. “When Laura marries I believe she comes into the money her father left in trust. I wonder if that might embarrass the Sprys.”

Buffet rubbed his nose nervously. He and his friend looked ready for a nap, and Littlejohn wasn’t far off snoozing himself. The photographs of cricketers over the fireplace began to grow uncertain in outline and the hypnotic ticking of the big clock was soothing.

“I’ve heard about that ... Ronnie mentioned it once. Didn’t want anybody to think he was after Laura’s money. But surely the Sprys, or Spry himself, wouldn’t go so far...”

“You never know. I’ve had one or two cases. You’d be surprised.”

Mr. Habakkuk suddenly roused himself.

“Tell us something about your cases. You know, a tale round the fire.”

Littlejohn was seeking an excuse in his own mind, but he saw he wouldn’t need any. Stall for a minute or two, and the old chap would be sound asleep.

Outside, cars and footsteps passed the door now and then. There didn’t seem to be many people about. Here in this quiet spot murder seemed very far away. Yet, somewhere in the village was a killer.

Heavy footsteps came pounding along the macadam and halted at the door. There was a thunder of knocking.

“Come in! Come in!” shouted Mr. Buffet, rousing himself, his grey hair disordered and his eyes wide.

The three men by the fire put their heads round the wings of the armchairs they were occupying.

It was P.C. Costain, red in the face, eyes popping, and breathing laboriously from running.

“Inspector! I’m glad I’ve found you. Somebody’s bin at it agen on Gallows Hill. This time it’s Butt ... P.C. Butt. If the vicar ’adn’t ’appened to be passing he’d ’ave bin a gonner. Binder twine again, sir. He’s unconscious at Dr. Gell’s. Can you come?”

Littlejohn had the greatest difficulty in preventing his two new cronies from joining him, but finally dissuaded them. He left them both on the mat,



wide-eyed like startled children, and hurried out with the constable.

“I never was fond o’ Bill Butt, sir. But this is the bloody limit,” panted Costain on the way. And, having thus relieved himself of his feelings, he seemed more like his placid self again.

## 6.

### CONFESSIONS

*“Very singular things occur in our profession, I can assure you, sir.”*

CHARLES DICKENS (*Pickwick Papers*)

IN normal times P.C. Butt was a figure of fun and scorn in Ravelstone, but the cowardly attempt on his life altered local opinion considerably. The fact that he had almost met his death whilst guarding the village from violence softened the hearts of most of his former detractors. He assumed an air of importance, almost heroic, during his spell in hospital. That was probably because absence makes the heart grow fonder and emotion tends to overdo things a bit. When Butt, restored to health and later to be seen back on his alien beat, reappeared in the flesh his popularity began to wane again and he was soon where he started.

The attempted murder of a policeman had peculiar repercussions in the Costain household, however. Soon after the crime the news spread like wildfire round the village and Mrs. Costain was informed that the constable had been strangled in the course of duty. *Which* constable was not specified, as the woman who bore the news had been too impatient to be off and spreading it to listen properly to the account.

In the brief seconds during which Mrs. Costain sought her hat and coat with which decently to garb herself for a visit to the doctor's, she saw herself alone, with no Joe to nag and find odd jobs for. At the same time, his longings to return to Ballaugh acquired an almost holy significance now that she thought him dead. She sat on the stairs, a broken woman for a minute or two, and sobbed her eyes out. Then she dried her tears, blew her nose, and ran all the way to the Gells' place.

“Oh, Joe!” cried Mrs. Costain when she saw Butt instead of her husband stretched on the surgery couch. She flung herself sobbing on Costain’s navy blue breast.

Costain was quite bowled over. He wasn’t used to the least exhibition of emotion from Liza. It brought tears to his own eyes. After quite a struggle he disentangled himself and persuaded his wife to go home and wait for him. On the way she called at the back doors of the butcher and the fruiterer for supplies of steak and cowheel. These were gladly produced by their respective purveyors in exchange for up-to-date information. In fact, the greengrocer gave Mrs. Costain his part of the mixture free of charge. At the time, overcome by events, he felt deep gratitude to the police effervescing in his bosom. The next morning, however, he regretted his impulsiveness on remembering that he paid rates for police protection, and he evolved a plan for getting his money back with interest over a series of transactions for fish and sprouts at a penny a time more than usual.

It was long past midnight when P.C. Costain sat down to his favourite dish of steak and cowheel opposite his chastened and solicitous wife. As he entered she had instinctively greeted him in the usual way. “Wipe ...” And then the words froze on her tongue. “Hullo, Joe! Draw up to the fire, Joe.”

Joe talked about Ballaugh all through his supper and Liverpool was never mentioned. The constable was fluent on this occasion, for on the way home he had fortified himself with a medicinal dose of whisky at *The Bird in Hand*, and this had been supplemented by another double on the house by the grateful landlord.

The following day the village was in a turmoil from morning till night.

First, there was the inquest on young Free at eleven in the morning. Then, the funeral at mid-day. Butt’s escapade of the night before was bandied from group to group and from queue to queue. And, in the midst of it all, oranges arrived for distribution. It wasn’t fair of the Ministry of Food to choose such a day, but it was just like them.

At the height of all this commotion a large lorry, loaded with building materials and six men with grim faces, passed through Ravelstone on its way to Ditchling Episcopi to repair the ruined roof of the police station.

The inquest on Ronald Free was held in the Village Hall, and there was a large queue waiting for admission when Mr. Sylvanus Groan, the County Coroner, arrived. This annoyed Mr. Groan, for he was a native of Ditchling,

and an inborn antipathy towards all Ravelstonians caused him to resent providing entertainment for them. He was more annoyed when the audience assembled before him. All the women had oranges in their shopping baskets and some of their children had even pounced on the rare fruit and were noisily sucking them and pitching the peel and pips all over the shop. Two old men on the front row were smoking pipes of twist.

Mr. Groan was a small, dapper man, dressed in black for the occasion, and wearing spats. He had a large, bald head, large ears, a large mouth and an enormous purple-tinted nose. It was rumoured that presiding over so many suicide enquiries had made him a melancholy secret drinker. He looked hungrily at the oranges leaking from the shopping bags, glared malevolently at the children burying their mouths and noses in them, and angrily beat the desk with his gavel.

“Clear the court!” he yelled to his officer. “This isn’t a harvest festival!”

After this operation there remained only a residue of determined spectators, who had insisted on their rights as citizens and democrats. It took ten minutes for P.C. Costain to tell his tale, for the doctors to give their reports and for Laura Cruft to testify, and then Mr. Groan adjourned the inquest *sine die*. As he climbed into his car the ejected audience, now queuing for cakes at the pastrycook’s, hooted him.

Meanwhile, Sam Stopford, *Funerals Reverently Conducted, Cremations a Speciality*, was hurrying to and fro about the place. Sam was usually very cheerful when pursuing his usual trade of carpentry and joinery, but now he had assumed his funeral expression and uniform of top hat, frock coat and corrugated black trousers. Wherever he went he carried such a blast of death and corruption that men felt like baring their heads when he passed by, as to a corpse in a coffin. He was deaf on one side and when addressed from the wrong quarter either failed to respond or, as a rule, said “Wot?” and swivelled his large, square head round to bring his good ear into operation. This day, however, importance had made him totally deaf.

Littlejohn was in Melchester, talking things over with the Chief Constable. Greatly to the Inspector’s relief, Stanley had himself been smitten by the influenza which had so decimated the force. Fortunately, Superintendent Glaisher had recovered from his bout of the epidemic and had returned to collaborate on the case. Littlejohn found this efficient and modest old-stager a much better and less exasperating colleague.

Glaisher was lanky and thin with a furrowed face and a tired manner. Only his black, sparkling eyes were animated. For the rest, he looked like a dissipated French savant of the last century. The cut of his clothes was even out-of-date. Perhaps it was living a semi-fossilised life in Melchester made him such a relic.

The Chief Constable, thin, aquiline and radiating intense physical fitness, was torn between concentrating all the energies of his force on the murder and attending to the routine of the district with a staff cut down to half by the prevailing epidemic.

Littlejohn offered to carry on himself until more men returned to duty. He would send for Cromwell, his sergeant, if necessary.

They left it at that and went on to discuss the state of the case so far.

Littlejohn told them what he had already done. The visit to Apple Tree farm. The chatter of the two old gentlemen, Buffet and Habakkuk, on the previous evening, and the love and money aspects of the affair as far as he had been able to ascertain.

Then, the final curtain of the day's work: Butt almost killed in the same way as Free.

"Quite obvious that the murder of Free wasn't a casual affair, then," said Glaisher. He had a tired, monotonous voice, and his long legs and sprawling attitude, feet on the coal scuttle and body slumped in a wooden armchair, reminded Littlejohn of that of a famous philosopher-politician in the House of Commons before he was elevated to the Lords. "It couldn't have been a tramp, I mean."

"Why?"

In spite of his alert manner, Sir Guy wasn't as quick on the uptake as his lackadaisical subordinate.

"It looks to me as if Butt had some information that endangered the murderer," droned Glaisher. "So whoever it was tried to wipe him out."

"Has Butt been questioned yet?"

"No, sir. They gave him a sleeping draught early this morning and he wasn't awake when I called. It seems his father met with an accident yesterday, too, and the pair of them are side by side in the same ward. They started quarrelling in the middle of the night and the nurse gave them both a shot of something to stop them."

“Well, it’s high time Butt was wakened and his tale got out of him, dope or no dope.”

It was quite true that in the night there had been a battle royal between old Butt and his son. When the night nurse’s back was turned, the ancient of days had rudely awakened his son and demanded an immediate explanation of his skulking in bed in hospital when he ought to have been laying a murderer by the heels.

“Did you denounce Costain?”

“No. An’ I ain’t goin’ to. Saved my life, did Joe, and whoever does Will Butt a good turn never regrets it.”

P.C. Butt thereupon told his parent what had happened and how near to death he had been.

Old Nehemiah was furious. He reviled his son for proclaiming his business to all and sundry. He called him an incompetent ne’er-do-well. He taunted him about his wrestling, saying that after all his parent had taught him he couldn’t wrestle a rice pudding.

“’Ow the bee haitch I ever begot yew, I don’t know. If I ’adn’t explicit trust in yore pore dead mother I’d have said you was somebody else’s son.”

Whereupon P.C. Butt, his head aching from his rough handling on Gallows Hill and almost bursting from his father’s abuse, rose from his bed, seized the old man by the throat and told him what he’d do to him if he didn’t shut up. He also squeezed the old chap’s windpipe until Nehemiah promised not to breathe a word about Costain’s crime to a soul.

By this time the ward, which held ten other sufferers, was in a state of pandemonium. Four of the inmates were drugged and slept through it, but the rest raised the roof. Two men, who on the previous day had lost their appendices, writhed from their beds and tried to get at the constable and his father with a view to murdering them. A chap with a broken thigh struggled to release himself from the blocks and tackle in which he was imprisoned and do the same. And a fellow of fifty who that day had had half his thyroid taken away started shouting for his mother.

The night nurse arrived hot and bothered and plunged a hypodermic into what she thought was an arm apiece of the combatants. She thus gave Nehemiah, whose struggling anatomy was mixed up with that of the patricidal William, two doses and P.C. Butt none. The old chap passed out at once and was still fast asleep when Littlejohn called. His son, seeing

Nehemiah fall unconscious, thought he had done for him and fainted with emotion. So they gave him a light sedative and he was able to talk with the Inspector in due course.

“What information had you got hold of that might have been dangerous to the murderer, Butt?” asked Littlejohn.

“Nothin”, sir,” replied the constable, but his powers of dissimulation were poor and he looked like the murderer himself.

“Come, come, Butt. Why should anyone attack you otherwise? You were just on patrol, I suppose. People don’t attack policemen for nothing.”

“I dunno. Perhaps it was because I boasted I’d soon catch the chap. I dunno.”

“Boasted? What do you mean?”

“I was goin’ through Ravelstone in the afternoon and some women in a queue started shoutin’ h’abuse. They’re that way in Ravelstone. Can see no good in anybody as doesn’t belong to their village. They started runnin’ down what I was doin’.”

“Well?”

“So I up an’ told ’em as I’d soon have the criminal by the ears. I boasted I’d got some information, and I hadn’t.”

“Are you sure?”

There were violent movements from the adjacent bed.

“Tell ’im about Joe Costain and the partridges,” yelled old man Butt, recovering from his double hypodermic and full of beans.

The nurse, fearing a renewal of hostilities, thereupon made a signal to a male orderly, who at once wheeled the shouting Nehemiah into another ward.

It happened that Costain was sitting in an anteroom waiting to enquire about P.C. Butt’s condition. Littlejohn at once brought him to the bedside and dragged out a confession from both men concerning the partridges, their slaughter and ultimate disposal.

“I’m not here investigating poaching offences, and as far as I’m concerned the matter’s finished with,” said the Inspector when the sorry tale had been finished.

Both police constables looked relieved, shook hands and parted the best of friends.

“Always was a lucky one, Joe,” Butt was heard to mutter to himself as he fell asleep again.

“So it looks as if the murderer was somewhere within hearing when Butt started boasting to the women in the street,” said Littlejohn to Costain on the way home. “He must have thought Butt was going to expose *him* instead of you.”

Costain blushed and eased the collar of his tunic convulsively.

“I’m very much obliged to you, sir, for overlooking ...”

“Say no more about it. Now, we’ve got to find out who was in the queue and in the vicinity when Butt made his outburst.”

“If I may say so, sir, without presumption, I could take on that part. I knows most of the villagers and could set about finding out ...”

“Very well, Costain. Go to it. I’ll see young Free’s parents and one or two other parties whose names have cropped up lately.”

The strife between the rival constables was not to Littlejohn’s liking at all, and lest there should be a further outbreak of hostilities he had a word with the house surgeon at the hospital, which ensured the detention of P.C. Butt for a week or more. Old Butt, too, whose personality, under existing stress, alternated between his own and that of Noah, was kept to his bed, whence, unable to meet and denounce his son face to face, he sent him abusive notes couched in horrible handwriting and full of Latin tags and bad spelling.

Thus the two knockabout comedians were eliminated from the case and Littlejohn and Costain could get on without further interruption.



## 7.

### COSTAIN AT WORK

*“.... Monstrous Regiment of Women.”*

JOHN KNOX

IN offering to find out who might have been within earshot when Butt made his vainglorious boast, Costain, on later consideration, realised, to use his own words, that he “had bitten off more than he could chew.”

The worthy constable was nothing of a lady’s man. Any instinctive leanings he might have had in that direction had been stifled long ago by his vigilant wife, and a streak of natural shyness combined with his exclusive idolatry of Mrs. Gell did the rest. When Littlejohn left him to get on with the job alone, Costain felt like a swimmer out of his depth and fast being carried to destruction.

There was a long queue in front of the fishmonger’s when Costain turned up. The door of the shop was locked and inside the owner could be seen cutting up a halibut and making parcels of the portions, which he then secreted under the counter. Others he put in a basket for delivery later. Two or three women beat angrily on the doors and windows but the man inside was so preoccupied with dissection that he didn’t appear to notice. At any rate, there was enough dog-fish, cat-fish or whatever else you cared to call the livid objects lying on the slab, to supply the common herd outside, if they wanted them!

The women were, in consequence, in no mood to deal patiently with Costain’s enquiries. Rather, they sought to enlist his help against the wicked tradesman.

The tail of the queue seemed to be composed of the least violent faction, and Costain, after reciting chapter and verse of the penal code in support of non-interference, disentangled himself from his tormentors, pretended not to see one of them who was picking up stones and threatening to throw them through the window, and solemnly ran the gauntlet, feeling like a small boy on the way to a good caning.

The last person in the file was a small, wiry, parchment-faced woman who had so many children she didn't know what to do. Her name was Moppett, her husband was a roadman, two of her eldest sons were in the forces, and the rest of her mixed brood at school. Childbearing, queueing, worrying about her soldier sons and writing to them regularly, listening to the outpourings of her husband, who was a communist and freethinker and dead-set against God and the state, and sorting out the clothing coupons of ten of them, had given her the resignation of despair. She therefore received the bobby courteously.

"Vis, I was in the queue yesterday," she meekly replied to Costain's question.

"Who else was in the crowd, Mrs. Moppett?"

Mrs. Moppett's patient, homely face assumed a thoughtful expression.

"Let me see ... Mrs. Bottomley, Mrs. Fryte, Mrs. Tattersall, and her daughter-in-law Mrs. Lambert ..."

"And Mrs. Connolly, Mrs. Slamm, Mrs. Jelliby ..."

"Mrs. Golightly, Mrs. Crompton, Mrs. Leighe ..."

A number of other women, overhearing the enquiry, eagerly joined in and added their quota, finding in this new game a means of passing the time away.

"Old Uncle Tom Cobley and all," shouted a woman with a sense of humour.

To the hot and bothered Costain it was like taking a census of the heavenly host. He struggled to get out his notebook and pencil, lubricated the tip of the latter copiously on his tongue, and held up a large palm.

"Ladies, ladies ... Please ... One at a time ..."

In his heart he realised that the game was hopeless. What was the use of scribbling down lists of women who, although in their present mood might gladly make mincemeat of the fishmonger, would never in this world murder a young chap, who'd done them no harm, in cold blood?

Costain required all his will-power not to flee and show the mob of eager helpers a clean pair of heels.

Suddenly aid from heaven arrived from an unexpected quarter.

Hitherto unseen by Costain in the queue and standing in a form of respectful vacuum created by women who would not take the liberty of presuming familiarly to rub shoulders with her, was a heavy-bosomed, flat-footed lady dressed in a loosely-cut tweed costume with a patch of totally different material adorning each elbow and on her head a hideous, shapeless felt hat, perhaps a sporting cast-off from her husband's wardrobe. The lady of the manor, the Hon. Mrs. Liscomber.

Mrs. Liscomber had the consolation of knowing that under the fishman's counter reposed a packet or two for delivery at the tradesmen's door of the Hall, but had joined the queue for coarse fish to show she was a democrat and not afraid to mix with the common crowd and share its trials and tribulations. Her fellow sufferers in the queue admired this spirit and promised themselves to vote for Mr. Mortimer Liscomber at the forthcoming by-election, which was exactly what the Honourable wanted. Surely if her spouse could, in the interest of the Conservative party, kiss all the babies in the village ...

"What's all this about, Costain? I hope you're not annoying these good women. As if they hadn't enough troubles without your adding to them."

Mrs. Moppett and her collaborators clucked comfortably and completely absolved Costain from officious or indecent behaviour.

"What is it, then?"

"Might I 'ave a word with you in private, madam?" replied Costain. The Honourable was a county magistrate and deference was therefore due to her.

Whereat, accompanying the constable to the doorway of the baby-linen, embroidery and holiday souvenirs shop, Mrs. Liscomber listened to his tale. She heartily sympathised with Costain, whose attitude towards her was highly gratifying, although had she known what he had done to her husband's few remaining birds a couple of nights ago she would probably have changed her tune.

"Leave it to me," said the Honourable briefly, and forthwith mingled with the string of women, passing from one to another like a bus conductress collecting fares from a squad of strap-hangers. This she did

with such patience and good will that one and all inwardly confirmed the cross they proposed to put against the name "LISCOMBER, Mortimer," at the poll. Even little Mrs. Moppett, whose husband had sworn to wring her neck if she voted for anyone but the Communist (who later received 12 votes and forfeited his deposit), decided in favour of martyrdom.

In the midst of Mrs. Liscomber's canvass the fish merchant opened his doors and was forthwith ordered by the Honourable to close them again until she gave the word. This he did with great pleasure and could then be seen making himself a nice cup o' tea in the rear of the shop, eyeing the queue with proprietary relish, and cutting up the small remainder of the halibut and stowing it in parcels under the counter again.

Finally, the Honourable said When. The queue moved forward with great velocity and carried Costain and Mrs. Liscomber with it into the shop, whence they later emerged each with a flat fish trimmed with a kind of livid tail and gills and wrapped in a small piece of dirty newspaper. The Honourable talked hoarsely with the bobby on their way to and from this triumph.

"You don't want the names of all the rank and file of ordinary people in the village street when Butt started to boast, do you? They couldn't possibly have done it. You don't want those ... Oh, no."

"No, madam," replied Costain, hypnotised by Mrs. Liscomber's prominent and commanding eyeballs and excited red face. She closely resembled the fish which had just been deferentially passed over the counter by the shopman, who would have liked to wink at her to show that the necessary was being taken care of, had he dared.

"I know all the scandal of the village, constable, and in my opinion, in my opinion, the following names should interest you. Young Blaize was standing at the door of the inn and could well have heard all that was going on. Laura and Mrs. Cruft were in the fancy-goods shop next-door-but-one buying black stockings, and the door was open. Mrs. Paget was in the queue ... Professor D'Arcy Lever was sitting right opposite in his car, waiting for his wife who was showing a friend the epitaphs in the churchyard. And Johnny Hunter and that Shortt fellow who poses as a woman and writes sloppy romances were smoking their pipes and sitting on the wall of the churchyard talking."

Costain scribbled it all down illegibly in his book.

Then he turned a startled face to Mrs. Liscomber.

“You seem to know all about the case, madam,” he said admiringly.

“It’s my business to know all that goes on in my parish, Costain,” she replied, and with that she climbed into her disreputable two-seater, acknowledged the bobby’s salute by a flick of the hand, and drove off. On the way she flung the reward of her afternoon’s queueing into a cattle-pond, without slackening speed, thereby causing the farmer who owned the water resolutely to propound to his cronies a new scientific theory concerning how catfish creep from the sea over dry land in search of fresh water at certain seasons, like eels.

Costain was baffled by the Honourable’s apparent gift of second sight, and, when he reported to Littlejohn later, the Inspector made up his mind to visit her at the Hall.

It was all quite simple, however. Combining the functions of sympathising with the bereaved and catching their votes, Mrs. Liscomber had that morning visited Mr. Jonas Buffet and pumped that garrulous old man dry.

Although there was plenty of activity at the police-house at Ditchling Episcopi, Mrs. Butt was lonely. Two workmen were drinking tea in the garden; two more were sitting unsteadily on the wreckage of old Butt’s ruined coal-shed discussing sport; and another was apparently playing a gigantic game of draughts on the roof by moving piles of slates from one to another of the squares formed by the crossed spars, and then back again. Old Nehemiah had certainly made a wreck of the place and it needed several brewings of tea and a lot of post-mortems about the previous Saturday’s football to bring the workmen to a frame of mind to set about it.

All the same, Mrs. Butt was very forlorn. Assured that Will was quite out of danger, she nevertheless missed him about the place and had lost the quiet sense of security which his presence inspired. She did the house through twice to take her mind off his narrow escape and made several cups of tea, but these failed to restore her spirits. At length she turned on the wireless.

*... How the thought of you clings,  
These foolish things,  
Remind me of you.*

She burst into tears. And she was still weeping when Littlejohn called.

“Whatever’s the matter, Mrs. Butt?” asked the Inspector.

“I miss ’im,” she sobbed, wiping her eyes on her apron, and sniffing.

“That’s all right. I’ve just seen him and he was full of beans. Although he’ll have to stay in hospital for a few more days. He’s had a shock, you know.”

“Yes. I reely ought to be glad I’ve still got ’im. But what I want to know is, who could have bore anythin’ against my Will? Why, he wouldn’t ’urt a fly, wouldn’t Will. Why should anybody want to do ’im voilance?”

“He must have been finding out more than was good for someone and they tried to keep him quiet.”

“It might have been the document they were after.”

“Document?”

“Yes. But that was about Joe Costain and somethin’ about some partridges as Will brought in the night before ... I don’t know ...”

“How did you know about any document, Mrs. Butt?”

“I overheard Will and his dad talkin’ something about Costain and then Will went and wrote it all out on paper and went off to see somethin’ about it.”

“Did he mention it to you, Mrs. Butt?”

“No. Never discussed official business with me. But I know it was about Mr. Costain because I overheard Will recitin’ it to himself in the front room. He always read aloud his reports to himself, to see if they chimed properly.”

“I see. And when he went out he had the report with him?”

“Yes. I saw him put it in the top pocket of his tunic and button it up.”

“Have you been to see him today?”

“No. I’m just goin’ to phone Sister now and ask if I can go.”

“Right. Whilst you’re on, ask her to enquire of your husband if the report is still in his pocket.”

Mrs. Butt went off to the instrument in the lobby at once and was soon back.

“I can go right away. And Will says the paper wasn’t in his pocket when he came round last night. Somebody’s took it.”

There was a knock on the back door.

It was the man from the roof asking if Mrs. Butt could make him a brew of tea, so Littlejohn, having nothing further to ask Mrs. Butt, thanked her, bade her good-day and set out to visit the next on his list.

## 8.

### AT “THE BIRD IN HAND”

*Bury me on a sunny morning,  
So that none following my ragged cortège  
Shall suffer wind, or squall, or rain ...  
And get a beastly cold.*

ALBERT GLATIGNY

THE funeral of Ronald Free took place at noon. Rather a queer time, but there was to be a meal afterwards at the village café and the proprietor had refused to lay the spread at any other time than one o'clock. Had it rested with him, he said, he would have done it with pleasure, but the staff wouldn't stand for it in the middle of the afternoon. You know what they are these days.

There were no women present and there was no hearse or carriages. The Frees lived near the church, so six men from the University, friends of the murdered man, carried his coffin on their shoulders to the graveside.

Nobody looked comfortable. Sam Stopford, more deaf than ever, had been quarrelling with the gravediggers, who only just finished in time. In his ill-humour, the undertaker seemed to have shrunk in size; or else his clothes had expanded, for they hung on him like washing on a clothes-horse.

Old Mr. Free, the victim's father, followed the coffin like one hypnotised, looking neither to left nor right. Mr. Buffet was supporting him and Mr. Habakkuk was supporting Mr. Buffet.

The tail end of the procession consisted of young men from Melchester University. Some wore black ties, others didn't; all of them were in sports

coats and flannels and their attire contrasted sharply with that of the principal mourners who were in black from head to foot. Then there was a motley crowd of youths from the University, evidently making a day-out of the event.

Mr. Turncote met the coffin at the lych gate. He was flustered, too. That morning he had been summoned to the episcopal palace to tell the bishop all about the murder and the attempted murder. Immersed in domestic cares the vicar had found himself lacking in any news at all, except the names of the victims, and the bishop had been very displeased. He had accused Mr. Turncote of parochial slackness and kept him so long that the vicar had needed to hire a taxi to get him to Ravelstone in time for the funeral.

Before calling at the palace Mr. Turncote had been foraging for fish in Melchester and this must be cooked by 12.30, when his grandchildren came in from the nursery school.

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God and in the face of this Congregation ...” intoned Mr. Turncote.

A divinity student from the University thereupon hastened to the vicar’s side, pointed out he was beginning to solemnise matrimony instead of burying the dead, and set the good man right.

Littlejohn, standing in the taproom of *The Bird in Hand*, watched it all going on through the low, leaded window. Until the funeral was over he was at a loose end.

“I see Johnny Hunter’s buried the hatchet and is helping to put his dear old pal under the sod ...”

Littlejohn turned.

Standing in the doorway was a tall, flabby man with a tankard in his hand. He might have been anything between twenty-five and thirty. He looked to be running to seed from beer drinking. Untidy, black hair worn long and shaggy at the neck, a small black moustache and a blotchy red complexion. His eyes were keen and bright under tired lids. His heavy lips wore a sarcastic smile.

“Which is Hunter?”

The newcomer advanced to Littlejohn’s side. He wore a shabby suit of brown tweed and dirty brown shoes.

“First on the left ...”



So that was Hunter, with whom Free had parted company through Laura Cruft. Tall, lean, dressed like the rest of the students in tweed coat and flannels, but with a black tie floating loose over his jacket. His long, fair hair fluttered as the breeze caught it. His profile was like that of a Greek statue and, at present, as immobile. Probably a favourite with the girls if he cared to exert himself.

“Quarrelled with Free about Laura. Now he’s left in the field again ... eh ... what?”

“I don’t seem to know you,” said Littlejohn, trying to change the subject.

“Who? Me? You oughto, you know. I live here. Blaize. Tim Blaize. Father owns this place ... Help him to run it ...”

“Oh, yes. So you’re Tim Blaize.”

“Heard of me, then, have you?”

“Yes.”

“Nothin’ good, I’ll bet.”

Blaize was half-seas-over at that early hour. Littlejohn would have liked to send him packing, but he seemed talkative and it wasn’t long to lunch.

The funeral was over and some spectators were beginning to straggle in the bar. Blaize didn’t let them worry him and left it all to the barmaid, who could be heard working the pumps and attending to orders.

“Two whiskies, Edna ...”

The noise of squirting soda-water ...

“Drink up, ole man ...”

“What’ll yours be? Bit cold in the churchyard ...”

“Cheers!” “Bottoms up!”

It might have been an event calling for celebrations!

Blaize breathed beer over Littlejohn.

“If I were in your shoes, Inspector, I’d chuck this investigation. No use stirring up the mud of the village for the sake of a swob like Free. You can poke around till doomsday and you’ll never find who did for him ...”

“A swob, did you say. I thought Free was a young fellow with a good reputation.”

Blaize laughed. Thick bubbling noises in his throat.

“Good reputation! Don’t make me laugh. Ask young Hunter about your little saint-with-halo. While Johnny Hunter was away doin’ something in a

government lab.—he’s a good physics chap, they say, and exempt from the forces on account of it—while he was away, Free pinched his girl. Same with me.... When I left to join the R.A.F., Laura was supposed to be as good as hitched to me; when I came home invalided out with my heart not playin’ the game, I found her knockin’ around with Free. And Hunter had had his turn between the two of us.... To say nothin’ of the hearts Free broke before he finally pitched on Laura ...”

More bubbling noises came from Blaize’s throat and he buried his face in his pewter pot again.

The unofficial mourners from the University had separated themselves from those invited to the funeral-spread and some caught the bus back. Others turned into the pub, a number of them prancing about the place like a lot of horses gone mad. One was behind the bar working the pumps and cuddling Edna.

“Two bottled beers ...”

“Two tankards of hogwash, Hebe, my darling ...”

“What’s your night off, Edna, my pet ...?”

They invaded the room where Littlejohn and Blaize were standing. Blaize greeted them curtly. Some of them looked down their noses at him; others were jocular.

“Better get in the bar, Blaize, and defend Edna’s virtue. You ought to be good at that!”

“Shut up!”

“Come on, Inspector, I’ll show you the dining-room. Lunch’ll be ready in a brace of shakes.”

The dining-room was small and, as yet, there was nobody there. Outside, in a car-park at the back of the pub, a few men who had come in cars to the funeral were shunting them here and there, manoeuvring to get through the narrow gate into the road.

“You’ll understand, Inspector, I’m not doubting your skill as a detective. Oh, no. But you don’t want to be here for the rest of your life, do you? And that’s what you look like being. There are so many trails.”

Blaize had filled up his tankard and was getting more and more fuddled.

“What do you mean, Mr. Blaize?”

“I daresay you’re wonderin’ what I’m gettin’ at. You may even think I killed Free. Well, forget it. I was here, indoors, entertainin’ my father’s

better-class guests, addin' tone to the place by my distinguished presence, sir. And a dozen or more people'll bear out what I'm tellin' you."

"Such as ...?"

"Why bother with a list of names. You'll be in the place tonight. Ask the first chap you meet where I was when Free was garotted. Here, right here, he'll tell you, so help him God."

"What about these other trails you're talking of?"

"Edna, bring me a packet of Gold Flake from the bar, that's a good girl. Never mind what they want ... Bring me the cigarettes, damn you! We were sayin'?"

"Trails ... the many trails, Mr. Blaize."

"Oh, yes, the trails. Well, they tell me Free and the lovely Laura had just plighted their troth, whatever that may mean. Bang went the chances of half-a-dozen chaps who were mad about her. For the time bein', I mean. For the lovely Laura made a habit of makin' and breakin' engagements. Pie crusts, as you might say."

"And who might the chaps have been?"

"Professor Lever, for example. Elderly gent hearin' the sound of autumn violins; in other words, gettin' old and feeling the need of renewin' his youth by fondlin' Laura. Ask anybody. The old boy was nuts on her."

"I heard she was simply going to be his secretary."

"Secretary! That's a good one, sir. Don't make me laugh. No, a lifetime with the formidable Clarice and then ... snap, he cuts the painter ..."

"You've got an imagination, I must say."

A small brass band passed in the road, followed by a procession of clowns, tightrope-walkers, acrobats, ponies, a camel and an elephant. A circus from Melchester parading the locality in search of an audience.

The students rushed out, halted the procession and brought the performers in for a drink. Clowns' hats, turbans, toppers, bobbed around the bar. Two undergraduates were climbing on the elephant's back and one was feeding the camel with potato crisps. In the bar parlour the spider-lady was showing an admiring audience how she did it. The noise was terrific.

Nobody seemed grief-stricken at the loss of Free.

"Out of sight, out of mind," hiccupped Blaize, now properly tight. "I guess Laura feels the same. Probably huntin' a new lover ..."

Littlejohn, thoroughly disgusted, went off in search of his dinner. Ronald Free's friends seemed all to have gone, leaving behind a noisy residue out for a lark.

Suddenly there was a silence in the place, as though a ghost or something had walked in.

"I should just think so," crackled a sarcastic voice. "I thought you were here attending a funeral. It seems I'm mistaken. It's a circus. Where's Blaize?"

"Upstairs, sir," answered the subdued barmaid.

"Get him immediately."

Blaize, the elder, a small, dark man with a paunch like a barrel and a large, dark moustache and obsequious manner, descended the stairs with remarkable agility. He came down like an indiarubber ball, bouncing step by step.

"Yes, Professor."

"Turn out this rabble at once!"

They didn't need telling twice, but melted away into the street, taking their circus pals with them.

Tall, dark, deep-eyed, the newcomer plucked at his loose, heavy lips, glared at the landlord and, turning on his heel, left the place. With his heavy nose, saturnine expression, bent shoulders and long arms and legs, he looked like Mephistopheles toggled-up in tweeds of an old-fashioned cut and a black slouch hat.

"Who's the newcomer?" asked Littlejohn.

"Professor D'Arcy Lever," replied the landlord, crestfallen at his implied lack of discipline in his pub and wondering how to appease the indignant don now marching in dudgeon down the road.

## 9.

### THE FURIOUS CRIMINOLOGIST

*“Your face, my thane, is as a book where men may read strange matters.”*

MACBETH

AFTER lunch, Littlejohn jotted it all down on paper, just to clear his mind a bit.

Ronald Free.—Just engaged to Laura Cruft. Friendly with a girl or two before. Said by Blaize to be a bit of a bounder. Stole his pal’s girl in his absence. Affair (?) with Muriel Paget.

Johnny Hunter.—Friendly with Free until Free stole his girl. Took it badly and then went off with another girl, Jessie Fairfield.

Professor Lever.—Very friendly with Laura Cruft until she and Free became lovers. Apparently wanted Laura to be his secretary.

Spry.—Benefits through wife from Laura’s trust money until she gets married. Ill-tempered and very jumpy at present.

Littlejohn looked at his list and shook his head. A motley crew. Finally he added the name of Tim Blaize. Very bitter about Free, Hunter and Laura. Drinking heavily. Gives alibi for night of murder.

Littlejohn felt bored. Whether it was the heavy lunch, the mix-up of so many young people in this sordid affair, or the gloom hanging about the inn, he couldn’t quite decide. Anyhow, it looked like being a very unpleasant job whichever way it turned.

Costain’s melancholy face appeared round the door.

“Come in, Costain. Draw up to the fire. It’s a bit chilly.”

The constable made his report in a despondent voice.

All the village seemed to have heard Butt's boast that he'd soon lay the murderer by the heels on the strength of the evidence he'd accumulated. Every possible suspect had learned it, to say nothing of anybody else.

"I've a call or two to make, Costain. Meanwhile, I'd like you to call at Melchester Hospital again and see how Butt's getting on. Ask him what was in the report which was stolen from his pocket when he was attacked. I think it was all about you and your misdeeds with the partridges."

Costain blushed and passed his tongue nervously over his lips. Would he ever live it down?

"And find out, too, if anybody else knew what was in the document, will you?"

"Yes, sir. I'll be gettin' right along, then."

Old Butt, more pugnacious than ever, had just finished another nasty note to his son in the neighbouring ward.

"... If you go on like this you will finish up ignominiously like your Uncle Gus did ... Serve you right ... Incompeitent ... *Sic trāsīt inglorious...*"

Butt's Uncle Gus had been a journeyman plumber who specialised on heating systems but hated water. He always arrived drunk to deal with burst pipes. Eventually he ran away to America with his boss's wife, leaving him with three children and swearing to swing for him one day. Uncle Gus might have become a millionaire in his new retreat for anything old Butt knew!

The strain of writing this final letter must have taxed the old man's energies so much that he died in his sleep an hour later. Thus Costain found P.C. Butt very low in spirits.

Littlejohn paused at the gate of the Pagets' bungalow. The maid was there talking to the postman and signing for a registered package.

"Is Mrs. Paget in?"

The girl hesitated, torn between her gossip and dealing with the visitor.

"Yes, I think so. There's somebody with her. Just a minute."

The postman was a young fellow with a stiff leg, and seemed to be having a good time with the pretty servant, whose cheeks were flushed with pleasure at something he'd probably just said.

"All right ... don't bother. I'll find my way."

"But ... Here, wait a minute ..."

But Littlejohn was over the threshold and in the hall. The look in the maid's eye told him something interesting might be afoot.

"Let him be," said the postman. "When's your half-day, did you say?"

She didn't need much persuading to forget the Inspector.

A gruff voice was rumbling angrily inside one of the rooms, the door of which was closed.

"But let me explain ..." said a woman's voice, shrill with emotion.

"No need to explain nothin'. Them letters tell all that's got to be said. Best burn 'em at once. I won't 'ave no scandal on my boy's name."

Littlejohn knocked on the door.

The voices ceased. Words seemed to freeze on the lips of the parties in the room.

A pause, full of suspense, and then the handle rattled. A slim, pretty woman, perhaps a little over thirty and with straight, bobbed, straw-coloured hair, opened the door. She was wearing flannel slacks and a sky-blue jumper, which matched the colour of her eyes. Her hair reminded Littlejohn of a page-boy at a pageant.

"Yes?"

"My name's Inspector Littlejohn, madam. May I have a word with you?"

"I'm engaged at the moment ..."

"Don't bother about me. I'm goin'."

It was Mr. Free, Ronald's father, dressed in his shabby working clothes and holding his old bowler hat. His face was red with indignation. Littlejohn had evidently interrupted a stormy session.

Nothing more was said. Free stumped from the room without a word of parting, leaving scattered on the table what he had evidently brought with him, a bundle of letters. One of them had been withdrawn and lay open. Free must have been flinging its contents in Mrs. Paget's face when Littlejohn intruded. The envelope was beside it ... A bold, flowing, feminine hand ... Ronald Free, Esq., G.P.O. Melchester.

So that was it. Old Free had been going through his son's belongings and come across letters from Muriel to his son. They had evidently given the show away concerning past relations between the parties.

Muriel Paget stuck it out very well. She gathered up the bundle and the loose letter and boldly returned Littlejohn's look. Then she flung the odd

letter on the table.

“Read it! Read it! That’s what your dying to do. Go on. I don’t care. I loved him and he’s dead ... I suppose that solves the problem. He’s dead ... He loved me, too ... once ...”

She said the last word very faintly.

Littlejohn felt sorry for her. She was pretty in a delicate, doll-like way. Little, straight, almost impudent nose, and pink cheeks as though gently dabbed with paint. And a very attractive way of doing her hair. Her husband spent a lot of time in London, they said. And when he was home, his typewriter going like mad, day and night, churning out thrillers.

First a mutual interest in French literature ... A friendship ... A flirtation ... An affair.

She had flung the letter open right before Littlejohn.

*My darling Ronnie,*

*How like a winter hath mine absence been. Did you forget you were to meet  
me ...?*

Littlejohn pushed the letter back with his forefinger. He couldn’t help just catching the beginning as he did so.

Ronald Free had tired. It was easy to see that Muriel, eager, impulsively flinging all she had to give at Free, would stand little chance against the scheming, self-possessed Laura, if the latter made up her mind to it.

Muriel Paget lit a cigarette. She made one or two attempts to get the end of it in the flame of the match, her hands were trembling so much.

“What do you want?”

“You were a friend of Ronald Free, Mrs. Paget?”

She laughed mirthlessly.

“You ask that after the scene you’ve just witnessed. That was Ronald’s father, bringing back the letters I’d written to his son and accusing me of being a wanton ... Friend, indeed!”

She helped herself to a drink from a bottle on the sideboard. Whisky, and a liberal dose of it, too.

Littlejohn looked round. The room was cosily furnished in antique oak. Comfortable settees and armchairs, refectory table and tasteful dining chairs. Good pictures on the walls, too. There must be money in the thriller game.

“Well. What do you want to know? Let’s get it over.”



“Knowing Free, would you say he’d any enemies who might have done this thing?”

She gathered up the letters, started taking each from its envelope and burning them in the fire blazing in the brick grate.

“Me? Are you thinking I did it? Well, I didn’t ... I couldn’t have done it ... I ... I ... Oh, damn!”

She was on the verge of tears and passed it off by taking another liberal dose of whisky. Her nerves were evidently all to pieces.

Littlejohn looked at her hands as she handled the bottle and glass. Small, white, delicate. Difficult to believe them busy with a piece of binder twine.

Outside, the maid was still enjoying herself with the postman. A man in an old navy blue suit and a yachting cap on his head passed and greeted them, but they were too busy with their own affairs even to notice him.

“Where were you at the time of the crime, Mrs. Paget? Between nine and ten on Tuesday last?”

Muriel Paget turned white. Only her lipstick remained the same tint on her mouth, throwing the rest of her face into more ghastly pallor.

“I was out ...”

“Where?”

“Walking ...”

“Alone?”

“Yes.”

“In what direction?”

“Along the Melchester Road and back. I didn’t go anywhere near Gallows Hill, Inspector. I swear I didn’t.”

“It was a dark night to be knocking around alone, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. I felt I couldn’t stay indoors a minute longer. My husband had been working all night on his new book. He couldn’t bear to be disturbed when he was *creating*, as he called it sarcastically.”

“So you left him indoors and went off on your own?”

“Yes. But I swear I didn’t go anywhere near the Hill.”

“Very well, madam.”

A busy little woman had stopped by the postman and seemed to be asking him for letters. He wasn’t pleased at all about being disturbed and the pretty maid, with a toss of her head, turned her back and started to chase

off two hens which had escaped from the adjacent pen and were scratching up the flower beds.

Inside, there was silence save for the tick of the heavy case clock in one corner of the room. With inner rumblings it gathered itself together and chimed three-quarters.

"You've admitted that you and Ronald Free were on very intimate terms, madam. Your relations cooled off?"

"His did ... He found Laura Cruft more to his liking apparently. It wasn't to be wondered at ... After all, I'm ten years older than he was."

She said it with the utmost bitterness, and the thin line of her mouth grew tighter and quivered.

"Forgive the next question, but had there been others before the two of you?"

"Yes. He told me, when I taxed him with it, that he'd only been learning how to love from them. The love he gave me was its 'last perfect blooming.' A quotation from some French poet or other; Ronald was always quoting from French poets."

She had drunk too much whisky. Of that Littlejohn was sure. Otherwise, she would not be pouring out her heart in this fashion.

"Who were these other women?"

"I don't know ..."

"Come, come, Mrs. Paget!"

"I don't know, I tell you. Leave me alone, for God's sake!"

She made for the bottle on the sideboard again.

"I wouldn't have any more of that if I were you, Mrs. Paget. You'll make yourself ill."

"I'll please myself. What's it got to do with you?"

"Shall we change the subject. Just one or two more questions, then I'll leave you."

She said nothing. She had taken up a pointed manicure file and was viciously jabbing it into a blotter on the desk by which she was standing.

"As far as you know, did your husband remain indoors all the time you were out that night?"

"Yes. Judging from the number of pages of manuscript he'd got through, he'd worked hard all the time I was away."

"How did you know?"

“Oh, hell! Must we go on? He left his papers scattered on the desk and I gathered them together. I knew where he was when I left him. I do some secretarial work for him.”

“Did he know about your friendship with Free?”

“Thinking he might have murdered Ronald out of jealousy?”

“No. Will you answer, Mrs. Paget?”

“I guess he did. You can’t keep things like that dark here, with all the gossip that goes on. Probably some kind friend told him. I don’t know. He never mentioned it.”

“Are you and your husband on good terms?”

“If you mean are we still in love, no. We got over that long ago. If you mean are we good friends, yes. He’s kind and patient, as far as husbands go ...”

“May I ask where your husband is now, Mrs. Paget?”

“He’s in London. He goes down for two or three days every week. Don’t ask me what he does there. I don’t know and I don’t mind. We each live our own lives these days.”

“I see. When do you expect him back?”

“On the afternoon train. He should be in any time.”

The maid had hurried indoors and could be heard talking to someone in the kitchen.

“That’s my husband back now. He’s come in the back way by a short cut from the station through the fields.”

As Littlejohn turned to go the door of the room was flung open and Hilary Paget entered.

Littlejohn was amazed. Paget didn’t look like a crime writer at all. He would have been more at home quarrelling through the columns of newspapers about vegetarianism, vivisection, conscientious objection or total abstinence, rather than creating master criminals and more masterful amateur crime investigators.

He was small, thin and fair. There was hardly a scrap of colour in his thin, stubborn-looking face. His eyes were pale blue; he wore round, rimless spectacles, and a small moustache graced his upper lip with a sandy streak. He was washed-out looking and had baggy eyelids, as though he had missed several nights’ sleep or else starved for many days.

“Elsie tells me you’re a Scotland Yard detective. What are you doing here?”

Paget got down to brass tacks right away. He quivered like an angry little bantam cock. His pouted eyes protruded angrily.

Littlejohn was disappointed. He had read several of Paget’s thrillers and liked them. In fact, Paget’s private investigator, Billington Fane, struck the Inspector as being very human and well-drawn, because he wasn’t always triumphing over Scotland Yard like so many of his contemporaries. It was a comfort to read about him. But to think he was the product of the brain behind those pop-eyes and that splash of a moustache....

“Do you hear?”

Paget was nearly prancing with temper. Billington Fane was always as cool as a cucumber, even when they hung him head down over some quicksands and greased the other end of the rope with ham fat to make the rats chew through it and drop the sleuth to his doom ...

“I’m simply making a routine investigation, sir. I’m visiting everyone who was out in the village on the night of the recent crime.”

Mrs. Paget, sobered by the arrival of her husband and grown suddenly quiet, turned a brief and grateful glance on Littlejohn. So, the creator of sleuths perhaps didn’t know quite as much about his wife’s affair with Free as she said he did!

“Well? What the hell’s my wife got to do with it?”

“She was out-of-doors at the time.”

“How do you know?”

Paget had suddenly cooled off. He must have remembered Billington Fane. At least he seemed to be trying to behave like him and he was failing miserably. There was a smudge of soot across Paget’s nose which he must have picked up from the engine of his train, or something. It took away all his dignity. Littlejohn couldn’t keep his eyes from returning to it again and again. Billington Fane would never have had a smudge on his nose ... Let me see, *Baby-face Fane* the crooks called him ... And their knees knocked together.

“The constable on patrol met several people ... including your wife.”

Littlejohn lied gallantly and Mrs. Paget threw him another grateful glance.

“On a night as black as pitch?”

Littlejohn was getting a bit fed up.

“He had a lantern, of course,” he replied. “And would you kindly mind not putting me through a lot of questions, Mr. Paget? Neither you nor your wife is bound to answer any of my queries. I’m only asking for help.”

“And anything we may say will be taken down in writing and may be used in evidence against us ...”

Paget smiled sardonically and tried to look calm.

“I think you’ve got it wrong, sir. I’m surprised at you ...”

Littlejohn couldn’t help it; it was more than flesh and blood could resist!

Paget was in a rage.

“I’m going to London again ...”

Mrs. Paget made a questioning gesture.

“Yes. I’m going back in the morning. I’ve some business on and I’d have stayed overnight only I didn’t take any things.”

Paget wagged a forefinger right in Littlejohn’s face. His hands were lean and strong-looking.

“And don’t let me hear of you being here in my absence bullying my wife. I won’t have it!”

“He wasn’t bullying me at all, Hilary. He was very nice and polite ...”

“When I want you to interfere, Muriel, I’ll ask you. Please keep out of this ...”

“I must be going, Mr. Paget, if that’s all you have to say.”

“It is.”

“Good afternoon, then. Good afternoon, Mrs. Paget, and thank you.”

The maid must have been listening behind the door, for, as Littlejohn opened it, she performed a sort of figure-of-eight and pretended to be coming from another room to let him out.

“He’s a brute,” she muttered as she opened the front door. “And she’s so nice. Me heart bleeds for ’er. He’s that jealous. I don’t know what he’d do if he knew the things I know ...”

She breathed it hoarsely out of the corner of her mouth and suddenly shut up and pretended to straighten her cap when she saw her master’s pale eyes glaring at her through the window. She was a member of a below-stairs circulating library which specialised in salty romances and her sympathies were therefore on the side of handsome heroes against tyrannical old cuckolds whose young wives had become tied to them out of gratitude,

not luv. What the postman with the stiff leg would have thought about it all ...

“That’ll do,” said Littlejohn, rightly picturing the pretty maid lapping-up sixpenny paper-backs in her room late at night.

And, with that, he went to the village ’phone-box, rang-up Cromwell, and, describing Paget, told him to watch the trains coming into Paddington from Melchester and find out what the crime specialist did when he visited London.

## 10

### LISCOMBER HALL

*God's mercy is infinite; it even extends to the rich.*

ANATOLE FRANCE

P.C. COSTAIN reported his morning's work to Littlejohn and laid particular emphasis on the part taken in it by the Hon. Mrs. Liscomber.

The Inspector, therefore, decided to make the Hall his next port of call. Taking directions from the bobby, Littlejohn set out on foot and greatly enjoyed the walk.

A man was strolling in front of Littlejohn with a gun under his arm. The Inspector recognised Blaize, the landlord of *The Bird in Hand*. He saw Littlejohn as he turned to scramble over a stile. Littlejohn hoped the gun wasn't loaded; the way the fellow handled it was a menace.

"Afternoon, Inspector. Just going to take a pot at a few rabbits. Something for your lunch to-morrow."

Littlejohn smiled wryly and returned the greeting.

He didn't like rabbit.

The Liscombers lived at the Dower House. Not that they hadn't enough money to keep up the Hall. It was the servant problem that drove them to smaller quarters. As part of her war work Mrs. Liscomber had insisted on descending below stairs and giving a hand. No self-respecting servant could stand that for long!

The family had been an impoverished lot until Mortimer married the Hon. Matilda Popple, daughter of the head of a very flourishing bucket-shop and a peer of the realm thanks to his tireless efforts in company promoting in the national interest.

The only offer received for the tenancy of the Hall had been from the Union of Malleable and Ductile Metal Workers, who turned it into a rest home for their exhausted members.

Littlejohn passed a lodge with shuttered windows, tiles off the roof and the doors hanging off. The park lay beyond, sheep keeping down the grass and convalescent malleable and ductile workers parading about it or lounging in deck chairs in the sun.

An elderly maid opened the door of the Dower House, looked hard and long at Littlejohn's card as though unable to read, and bade him enter whilst she made her leisurely way to tell somebody he was there.

The house was large of its type. It must once have been very pleasant and airy. Now it was a bit neglected and moth-eaten.

"Come this way, please ..."

Another shabby room, but intimate and cosy from being lived in. Heavy oak chairs, a large dining-table, a huge oak sideboard carved with climbing plants with swollen leaves and flowers. Silver ornaments, trays and tea services. The plate hadn't been properly cleaned and a film of white powder remained in the engraved and crested parts and in the corners of the complicated floral patterns carved on it.

On the walls, old framed photographs of hunting and family groups and a large oil painting of a domineering-looking man in hunting pink.

Mrs. Liscomber rose from an easy chair near the fire. A big, florid woman with a large, flat face, bulging eyes and a big, straight nose with narrow nostrils. A perfect nosey-parker by the look of it. Her lips were heavy and the lower protruded. She wore an old tweed skirt and a baggy grey jumper. She put a fountain pen and writing-block down on the table as she greeted Littlejohn.

"Good afternoon, Inspector. I thought you'd be coming ..."

Littlejohn smiled.

"Good afternoon, madam. I've just called in to ..."

But Mrs. Liscomber was going to do the talking. She bit right into the middle of Littlejohn's sentence.

"You've called for my views on the murder."

Littlejohn was sure he'd get full measure. She looked brimming over with the subject and ready for anything.

"Yes ... Take a seat. It's high time we had a talk together."



She was polite, but firm. You got an impression of great quantities of energy bottled-up in her huge frame. She was evidently convinced that the Family ought to be in at the settling of all village affairs. It would have been sheer *lèse-majesté* to ignore them.

“Matters can’t go on as they are, Inspector. It’s time you and I had a serious talk together. A murder and a brutal attack on a policeman. Something must be done quickly before anything further happens.”

“We’re doing our best, madam.”

Littlejohn was nettled. He didn’t care for being taught his duty by a meddling busybody. Mrs. Liscomber must have sensed his annoyance. She rang the bell.

“Well you have some whisky, Inspector ...? Or maybe a cup of tea? I think there’s a little whisky left.”

All the same she ordered tea when the maid came in. She also offered Littlejohn a cigar from a box on the table. They looked a bit mildewed. Littlejohn said he preferred his pipe and was given permission to light up. He wouldn’t have been surprised to see the Honourable light a cigar herself. She looked masterful enough for it. She started to smoke a cigarette, however.

“I’ve expected trouble all along from that Cruft girl. The sort who revels in turning men’s heads and setting them one against another. Running loose in the neighbourhood! A perfect menace. I ought to have made it my business to speak to her, but they own their own farm and not being tenants of ours ...”

She shrugged her shoulders and turned down the corners of her mouth.

“Free’s parents are very decent people. Been in the village for longer than I can remember. It was a mistake, however, to spend so much on Ronald. They spoiled him. And he was very good-looking, too. The result was, he thought he could have anything he wanted. He took Laura Cruft from his friend.”

“I suppose *she* made the choice.”

“Of course, of course ... But young Hunter was away at the time. Laura had to have some man running about after her. I suppose young Free was the most eligible. The Free family didn’t like her. They accused Laura of leading their son astray and spoiling his career. Ridiculous!”

“Why?”

“He was quite an expert in the arts of love without any assistance from Laura. Tried to break the hearts of a few of the local girls at one time and another. Mrs. Paget, too. There was a lot of local gossip in that direction. Paget didn’t like it.”

“He knew then?”

“Of course he did. He and his wife had quarrels about it.”

“May I ask how you know that, madam?”

Mrs. Liscomber looked very annoyed. Here was somebody questioning her word!

“Servants talk ... The maid at the Pagets has overheard many things.”

So that was it! The flighty girl who dallied with the stiff-legged postman had been talking all over the place.

The Honourable was thoroughly enjoying herself in this washing of erotic dirty linen. She smacked her lips and her teeth clicked as she talked.

Although you wouldn’t have thought it to look at her now, Mrs. Liscomber, *née* Popple, had been a beauty in her time and had run through several affairs before that fine old English gentleman, Mortimer Liscomber, Esquire, married her. Her charms must have inspired her lovers to higher things. An absconding solicitor; a professional footballer who was suspended for good; a boxer out for the count after two minutes of trying to hit his opponent; and a French Cabinet Minister who had a hand in cooking the books of a lottery and shot himself ... She had had her money’s worth before finally settling down.

“Now, what I think we ought to do, Inspector, is to make a list of those likely to have suffered either by Free’s engagement to the Cruft girl or from some other source.... Let’s see ...”

She slapped the writing pad on the table and began to scribble furiously, her lips moving as she silently pronounced the chosen names to herself.

“There you are ... I’ll explain the significance of each name. Now ...”

There they were. The same old lot!

Blaize.

Hunter.

Paget.

Spry.

Professor Lever.

Then two quite unknown ones:

Rickerby.  
Miller.

And to finish off the lot:

Tramp.  
Homicidal Maniac.

Brilliant!

“There you are, Inspector. What do you make of those? I think you’ll get your man from among them.”

A door in the room suddenly flew open and Mr. Liscomber himself emerged from his lair, a kind of morning-room, which emitted a blast of pipe tobacco, and paraffin from an oil stove.

“How d’ye spell ratiocination, my dear?”

Liscomber was tall, heavy and clean. His broad, red, clean-shaven face looked devoid of all intelligence, but was attractive in its very innocence. He wore a baggy brown tweed plus-four suit and good brogues on his large, flat feet. His childish blue eyes opened wide at the sight of Littlejohn.

“The Inspector in charge of the Free case, Mortimer.”

“Howdedo ... Good man! Don’t look like a detective, if I may say so, sir. Thought they wore bowler hats and raincoats. Expect you’re disguised as a country gentleman, eh?”

Littlejohn didn’t know whether it was a joke or not, but he laughed.

“Hope you soon catch the blighter ... Probably one of the damned Reds!”

Mr. Liscomber’s grandfather had been a great friend of Sir Robert Peel, until the latter let the side down by repealing the Corn Laws. This betrayal probably caused the traditional family hatred of reformers of all kinds. Grandfather Liscomber, the man in hunting pink over the fireplace, had regarded “filthy radical” as the foulest epithet he could fling at anyone. Mortimer was chiefly occupied in rooting out and destroying Reds.

It was damned bad taste and ingratitude, to say the least of it, for a section of the local electorate to nominate Agricultural Reform (Red), Labour (Damned Red), and Communist (Bloody Red) candidates against him at the forthcoming by-election caused by the death of his cousin Bartley. At that very moment, practically on the very doorstep, the local Labour Party were enjoying the hospitality of the Hall from the Metal Workers and were fraternally quarrelling about who was to be their choice.

“What’s this about ratiocination? Did you pick that up out of the vicar’s sermon last Sunday?”

“Yes, m’dear, sounded good. Damn good. Word has a learned sound about it. Ought to go down well. Puttin’ it in my opening speech. ‘Women don’t bother about ratiocination; they want houses to live in and food without queuein’...’ Good, eh?”

“Fiddlesticks! Do you know what the word means?”

“No. Audience won’t either. But it’ll impress ’em.”

“And make you a laughing stock with the other parties. No, it won’t do. Cut it out and put ‘talk’ instead. Now go and get on with your speech again. I’m busy.”

“Sorry ... Didn’t know you were in conference. Can’t settle down, though. Seein’ those damned Reds comin’ and goin’ at the Hall makes my blood boil. Wish I hadn’t let the place to ’em ...”

He withdrew muttering to himself.

“Where were we ...? Ah, yes ...”

Littlejohn recovered himself with a start. The situations in which he found himself in this case were fantastic!

“Who are Rickerby and Miller, madam? They’re new names to me.”

“Rickerby is a local business man who retired to a bungalow between here and the village. Made a fortune dealing in cars in Melchester. Since then he’s bought a number of old houses in the locality, re-conditioned them and sold them at big profits.”

“How did he come to quarrel with Free, though?”

“Free headed a sort of University club which tried to stop what they called vandalism. Out-Tudoring the Tudors, they called it, whatever that may mean. Rickerby tried to block some footpaths, too. They tore down his fences and wire. Even pulled down a wall and fired some barriers he put up. Rickerby’s hot-tempered and took a gun to them. Free took the gun from him and knocked him down. Quite a local scandal. Rickerby always said he’d get even with Free.”

“All the same, not to the extent of strangling him in the dark, surely!”

“I don’t know. I think Rickerby’s mad, you know. He actually said my husband was wood from the neck upwards. His very remarks. No sense at all in them. Only a madman could talk like that.”

Littlejohn repressed a grin.

“Miller?”

“The gamekeeper on our estate. A strange, wild sort of a man. Lives at the far lodge. We wouldn’t have kept him on, only we can’t replace him these times, you know. Half gipsy and has a club foot. Excellent outdoor man.”

“How did he and Free get across?”

“He’s got a daughter.”

How many more? To hear them talk Free seemed to have made a full-time job of being a Don Juan!

“... A very beautiful girl, too, in gipsy fashion, but wild and a bit of a wanton. I can’t do any good with her, though I’ve tried all ways. Free was seen about with her, but seemed to cool off. She took it badly, I believe, and Miller was heard to say he’d shoot Free on sight.”

“Not strangle him?”

“Well, a gipsy might do anything.”

“Thank you very much, madam. And now I mustn’t take up any more of your time.”

Mrs. Liscomber’s prominent eyes grew wider with surprise.

“We’ve hardly started yet.”

“I’ve heard all about the remainder on your list.”

Outside, Mr. Liscomber could be seen warning-off a Red who had overstepped the boundary between the Hall and the Dower House. In the distance a number of men in cloth caps and bowlers filed down the steps of the Hall. They had finished their deliberations and had chosen the secretary of the Reachers-In and Drawers-Out Union to oppose Mortimer Liscomber in the Labour cause at the approaching contest.

“What do you think of Professor Lever? Met him?”

“Only just saw him in the village inn, madam. He was protesting against the uproar some of the undergraduates were making.”

“Well?”

“I couldn’t form an opinion from that.”

“A queer man. Very much under his wife’s thumb in spite of his international prestige. I’d say he’d profit by a dose of his own medicine. Full of repressions. Ought to psycho-analyse himself.”

“Indeed!”

“Mad about the Cruft girl. Another of them. Made himself a bit of a laughing stock I’d say. I hear they’ve been seen about the place together after dark.”

“By whom?”

Mrs. Liscomber ignored the question.

“You ought to keep an eye on that man, Inspector. Don’t be intimidated by his reputation.”

“Laura Cruft and young Free seem to have been a busy couple with their amours!” said Littlejohn. He was sick of tittle-tattling and anxious to get away. “Are you sure there hasn’t been a lot of exaggeration about the pair of them? Young people these days are more free in their relationships, but that doesn’t mean there’s anything wrong.”

“Wrong! My dear Inspector Littlefield, or whatever your name is, this isn’t a city. It’s a village and everyone knows what everyone else is doing. You can’t allow moral slackness to intrude.”

“But it may not have been moral slackness. Innocent friendships in the eyes of some people deteriorate into sordid affairs.”

“Are you insinuating ...?”

“I’m insinuating nothing.”

“I think you are, Inspector Littleways, or whatever you’re called. Let me tell you I know more about this village and the life that goes on here than you and all your police. I resent your insinuations and I have nothing more to say. Good day!”

Her mouth closed with a snap like a mouse trap.

The elderly maid appeared and Littlejohn was shown out. He didn’t apologise. He simply gave the Honourable a civil good-bye in return. When Mrs. Liscomber later told her husband what had happened, he hit the nail on the head right away.

“Another damned Red, my dear. They’re in everythin’ now. Even Scotland Yard.”

The following morning the Commissioner received a letter reporting the outrageous conduct of Inspector Small-weed, or whatever his name was. The inward letter was filed in the salvage bin and the outward one politely acknowledged receipt of the complaint and promised attention.

As Littlejohn cheerfully made his way back from the Hall, he met the Labour delegates climbing into their charabanc. The political opponent of

Liscomber was with them, being slapped on the back. He wore a velour hat and had a red carnation in the buttonhole of his blue serge jacket. It had been thought the occasion for a little looting of the Family conservatory.

“Good old 'Erbert.”

Later, 'Erbert won the seat for the Damned Reds for the first time in history and he's now an M.P. You'll know the one ... Always wears a velour hat turned down all round.

Littlejohn was gathered up by the party and given a lift back to the village.

## 11.

### NIGHT AT THE INN

*“Evening, thou that bringest all that bright morning scattered; thou  
bringest the sheep, the goat ...”*

SAPPHO (TR. E. M. Cox)

LITTLEJOHN crossed the gloomy corridor and entered the bar. He had eaten a leisurely evening meal at *The Bird in Hand* and lingered over coffee, smoking his pipe and turning over the case.

So far, he and Costain seemed to have covered a lot of ground with very little in the way of results. Plenty of gossip, a few tales told by local busybodies, but nothing definite to work on. The next job on the agenda was to call personally on the main characters of the case and find out whether or not the scandal talked about them was idle surmise or actual fact.

The church clock had just struck eight, and the inn, judging from the noise going on, was rapidly filling up with regulars.

The Inspector found himself in a large, cosy room, with a semi-circular bar in one corner. The counter was fairly long and already customers were standing there, elbow to elbow.

Edna, the barmaid, was busy serving, and Tim Blaize also stood behind the counter pouring out spirits and cocktails. He looked pleased with himself and saluted Littlejohn jauntily as he entered.

There were half a dozen tables in the middle of the room, all occupied by a better-class type of drinkers who dropped in for an hour to meet or entertain friends. There was a long string of cars in the road outside and the small car-park in the inn-yard was full.



The working-men didn't frequent this room, but could be heard laughing, shouting and playing darts in a smaller place across the passage, next door to the dining-room. A casual potman attended to them, coming and going all the time with glasses of beer and empties.

"Two gin and limes ..."

"Three double-whiskies, if you have them. This is my round, chaps ..."

"Two nut-browns ..."

Blaize took their orders and strolled about handing them out.

"What'll yours be, Inspector?"

"A pint of mild, please."

They gave him his beer and he sat in a corner. A long bench, upholstered in chintz and well padded, extended round two sides of the room. People were lolling on it, holding their drinks in their hands. Quite a number of customers were drinking alone. Nobody bothered you if you didn't want to be sociable. This suited Littlejohn.

More and more customers entered. Soon the place was chock-a-block with people and the waiters had a job to get about with the orders. Each group of drinkers chattering noisily about their own particular interests, yet the whole noise sounding like a single unanimous shout. You could hardly hear yourself speak.

One or two people stood out among the noisy groups. There was a solitary, elderly man in one corner who steadily drank whisky until they told him he'd had more than his share of the limited supply. Then he turned to beer. He wore a black and white check suit and an old-fashioned collar and stock, with a gold pin shaped like a horseshoe thrust through it. He sat next-but-one to Littlejohn, taking no notice of anyone, apparently immersed in his thoughts and the idea of getting drunk.

Between them was a young fellow taking a long time to drink his pint. Two or three times he turned to Littlejohn, opened his mouth as if to speak, and then halted as though he didn't know what to say.

Littlejohn gave him no encouragement. He wanted to watch and listen.

Finally the young man drank up and rose for a re-fill.

"Nice evening," he managed to get out at length. Littlejohn agreed that it was.

"Will you have a drink, sir?"

"I've not finished mine yet ... thanks."

The man rose and went to the bar. Blaize was round in a trice and bending over Littlejohn.

“This is Dr. Holker, a regular customer here,” he said, indicating the man in the check suit. “This is Inspector Littlejohn, of Scotland Yard, here on the Free murder case, doctor.”

The young man returned with his refilled glass and, finding them talking over his empty seat, sheered off and found a place elsewhere.

The doctor turned lack-lustre blue eyes on the Inspector. He looked a bit annoyed at being disturbed. Three months ago his wife had died in a motor accident. He had been driving the car and the catastrophe had been due to an error in judgment on his part. He had only been retired from practice in a northern industrial town six months, and his wife had always wanted to live at Ravelstone. Now he was by himself in the house they’d bought and had furnished just as she had planned. He couldn’t stand being alone now. “I ought to have turned the wheel to the left, instead of the right ...” Only drink took away the image of the brewery lorry hitting them ...” You all right, Bess? “And she hadn’t spoken ...

“I just wanted you to confirm to the Inspector that I was here all night when Free was murdered, doctor. I served you with drinks all the time, didn’t I? You remember? The Inspector’s just checking alibis.”

Blaize had a damned cheek! Littlejohn felt thoroughly rattled.

“You needn’t bother the doctor ... I’ll deal with that in my own time.”

“But we might as well get it over. That’s true, isn’t it, doctor? I did serve you all the time?”

“Oh, yes, yes, yes. That’s right, Inspector. Glad to speak for young Tim. That was right, he was here all the time.”

The doctor was far from drunk in spite of the drink he’d consumed. So Littlejohn had to take his word for it.

“Anybody else you’d like to confirm that, Inspector? There are quite a number here who could ...”

“No. Just let the matter drop now, Mr. Blaize. I’m quite satisfied. Refill my glass, that’s a good chap.”

“And bring me another, too. You’ve no whisky?”

“I daresay we could just squeeze another out of the bottle, doctor. Seein’ that it’s you ...”

The doctor lapsed morosely into his thoughts and seemed to forget the Inspector. "You all right, Bess?" Blaize had brought him a double. He clutched it eagerly.

People were milling round, shuffling here and there, moving from one group to another to greet friends and stand them drinks. Round after round ... From the room across the passage shouts of laughter blasted in as the waiter opened and closed the door of the room. Somebody was singing.

*In happy moments day by day,  
The sands of li-hi-hife may pass...*

A shrill, sentimental baritone, well in his cups.  
*Yet hopes so bright we used to deem  
Remembrance wi-hi-hill recall...*

The doctor was at the counter, trying to get another.

Suddenly Littlejohn caught sight of the man at the extreme edge of the bar. Hitherto he had been hidden by a large group of merrymakers who had driven up in three cars which they proposed to try to steer home after drinking all they could get.

It was Johnny Hunter.

He was drinking whisky, too. Not steadily and intensely like the doctor, but almost genially, smiling to himself as though enjoying being in the throng. None of his set seemed to be there. He apparently knew everybody, but they didn't press him to join them. Perhaps they thought that just having lost his pal he had to be a bit restrained.

Hunter's unruly shock of fair hair shone under the light. He was still wearing flannels, sports coat and black tie. He kept looking round and nodding to first one and then another. Blaize spoke to him now and then, but Hunter half snubbed him.

At length Johnny Hunter's eye fell on Littlejohn. He remained for a minute looking at the Inspector, then seemed to make up his mind. He picked up his glass from the counter and sauntered across the room to Littlejohn, staring straight at him. Just as though Littlejohn had offended him by catching his eye and he was coming across to pick a quarrel.

When he reached the Inspector, Hunter smiled. A charming smile which lit up his handsome face and showed his even, white teeth.

"Mind if I join you? You're the officer in charge of the murder investigation, aren't you, sir?"

“That’s right. You Mr. Hunter?”

“You know me, then?”

“You were pointed out to me in the funeral procession this morning.”

“I see. I just wanted to say how glad I am you’re here to clear up this beastly business. If I can do anything let me know. If I could lay my hands on the swine who did it ...!”

“I hope to be doing that myself very soon, Mr. Hunter.”

“Why? Have you found anything yet?”

“Not yet. But I will.”

The large party with the three cars was breaking up. One of them whispered to the other, who turned an anxious eye on Littlejohn. Then, bidding everybody good-night, he tried to walk out straight as if he were quite sober.

“See you all on Saturday ... Cheerio!”

Outside, they divided themselves up with a lot of noise and hoarse shouting, rattled their starters, ground their gears, and made off. In the distance you could hear them violently changing gear.

Hunter was talking in quiet tones.

“If they’d only given the fellow a chance to defend himself. To come upon him that way—the poor devil hadn’t a chance, had he?”

“A foul way of killing anybody. But all murder’s foul ...”

“I guess it is, really, but there are ways and ways. I wish I’d known what was going on. Wasn’t really far from the spot.”

“Where were you at the time, Mr. Hunter?”

Johnny Hunter smiled a bit sheepishly.

“Courting ... Sitting in the hedge in Lovers’ Lane. That’s a turning about three hundred yards from where it happened.”

“Indeed! Were you and your lady friend enjoying the nice night?”

“It was dark, but quite mild and pleasant. We’d been for a walk and stopped for a seat and a cigarette.”

“Very interesting. How long were you there?”

“Nearly three quarters of an hour. We heard the church clock strike a quarter to ten and left just before it chimed half-past. When we got to the village, we heard of the tragedy.”

“I see. Purely as a matter of form—I’m doing this in all cases of Free’s intimate friends—do you mind telling me the name of the girl you were

with?”

“Certainly. All open and above-board. We’re practically engaged and all the village knows it. My girlfriend’s called Fairfield—Jessie Fairfield. Lives at Brook House just over the bridge by the station. She’ll confirm that, I’m sure.”

Littlejohn looked straight at Hunter.

“Did anything happen in Lovers’ Lane whilst the pair of you were there?”

Hunter smiled and hesitated.

“Such as ...?”

“I’m asking *you* ...”

“Well ... It’s a bit awkward ... There were a few people about there, but I couldn’t say who they were.”

Still Hunter hesitated, smiling to himself.

“Well?”

“I don’t want to get a good man into trouble, but ...”

“Come along, Mr. Hunter. This might be most important. If you’ve anything to tell me, never mind getting people into trouble. Out with it!”

Hunter drank up his whisky and put the glass on the floor under the seat.

“It concerns P.C. Costain. You see, whilst we were there he arrived, apparently on patrol. We’d heard a covey of partridges roosting nearly opposite where we were sitting. You know, making that peculiar cooing noise and shuffling and preening. Costain turned-up and must have heard them, too. At the sound of them the bobby forgot his patrolling and started to hunt the hedge with his torch. Then he must have come across the birds, for the next thing we saw was the torch bobbing about and Costain wringing the necks of some of the partridges. We kept as quiet as mice. Who were we to stop supplies for the constabulary larder? Inside, though, we were bubbling over. We had a jolly good laugh when he’d gone. To see him scrambling about after those birds.... Have another drink?”

“No thanks, Mr. Hunter.”

“I hope Costain doesn’t get in hot water for this.”

“He won’t. I know all about that, and as far as the police are concerned, it’s all over and done with. We’ve more important work in hand. Costain has made a clean breast of it.”

“Good for him. A jolly decent scout, is Costain.”

“I quite agree.”

The crowd in the room was thinning. One by one the drinkers melted away and their cars could be heard taking them off into the distance. The doctor rose and went out without a word to anyone. In the taproom they were all singing together.

*Oh, darkies, how my heart grows weary, Far ... from ... the ... old ... folks ... at home.*

Some of the singers sounded to be sobbing.

“Is it true that you and Free weren’t on the best of terms when he died?”

“Who told you that?”

Hunter almost sprang from his seat with indignation.

“That’s not the point. Will you answer the question?”

“It’s not true. I’ll admit I got sore with him about Laura. She was knocking around with me at the time and I was very fond of her. I got hot under the collar about it and had a row with Free. That I admit. It was in hot blood, however. I’m a bit quick in the temper, you see. But it blew over. I found a girl I liked better and we suit each other fine. Free and I made it up. We were quite all right when he died. Who told you? It’s a damn scandal trying to create trouble that way.”

“Quite a lot of people are under the impression that you and Free were at daggers-drawn ...”

“Well, it’s a damned lie.”

“No need to get in a rage about it, Mr. Hunter. I take your word for it. This seems to be a rare place for gossip and I’m glad we’ve had this talk to put matters straight.”

“So am I. I wish I knew who’d told you that rigmarole ...”

“We’ll let it drop, then, shall we? Thanks for being so straightforward and answering me frankly. By the way, how long were you Laura Cruft’s boy-friend?”

“About six months, more or less. Why?”

“Can you suggest anyone who might derive some advantage from killing Free because he’d got himself engaged to Laura?”

“No. I can’t think of anybody who’d go so far. Unless it was Spry. You know, Laura has an income under her late father’s will. About four hundred a year, she once told me when we were very friendly. If she marries, that, of

course, will go from the Spry household. It might pay Spry to stop her marrying.”

“But he’s never shown opposition before, has he? I mean, Laura’s had quite a number of boys around. In fact, I hear she’s been engaged before.”

“Oh, yes. I don’t recollect Spry cutting up rough before. But suppose since the last engagement, about twelve months ago that would be, to an artist chap who came to live here and cleared out one night leaving nothing but debts behind him. Suppose, in the meantime, Spry has been using the funds of the trust ...”

“But can he get at them?”

“He might, through Mrs. Spry. Mrs. Spry is one of the executors, I know that. She holds the job jointly with Fothergill, the lawyer in Holchester. Suppose, in some way, the trust’s gone wrong. If Laura marries that will all come out ...”

“Yes, that’s true. It’s worth seeing into. Is Spry a spendthrift, then?”

“No, hardly that. But he’s a chap I wouldn’t trust. Shifty, you know. A secretive chap like that might be using the money for anything. I wouldn’t put it past him.”

“Very interesting ...”

Time had already been called and the potman and Edna were clearing away. In the passage the members of the taproom could be heard parting company and lunging out into the night.

“S’long, ole man ... An’ don’ forget ... Ever I can do you a good turn ... Pals, ain’t we?”

Blaize junior put in his head.

“Like a drink in our private place? After all, the Inspector’s living-in.”

“No, thanks. I must be getting to bed.”

“So early? The night’s yet young.”

“I’ve work tomorrow.”

Everybody had gone except Littlejohn and Hunter. The revellers from the taproom could be heard shouting and bawling in the distance. Outside, somebody was shunting about trying to get a car out of the car-park and through the narrow passage to the road.

“Well, good-night all ... Good-night, Inspector.”

“Good-night, Mr. Hunter.”

Blaize caught the Inspector's eye and looked as if he wished to say something. But he thought better of it, shrugged his shoulders and started counting the takings out of the till.

There was a sneering smile on Blaize's face which Littlejohn didn't like. The fellow knew something, he was sure, and was holding out.

"Good-night," said Littlejohn, and went upstairs to bed.



## 12.

### LAURA

*“Wende with yow I wil til we fynde Treuthe.”*

LANGLAND: *The Vision Concerning Piers Plowman*

LAURA CRUFT was sitting before the kitchen fire filing her nails when Littlejohn entered. He had met Mrs. Spry in the farmyard and she took him to her daughter when he asked for her.

“The Inspector’s called for another word with you, Laura.”

The girl rose, shook the paper she held in her lap in the fire and then turned an enquiring look on Littlejohn.

Mrs. Spry left them together.

Laura tried to give the Inspector her customary bright, attractive smile, but it fell a bit flat. She looked nervous and not herself at all. Littlejohn wondered why.

“I thought that now the upset of the funeral is over you might care to talk a little more freely.”

“What is there to talk about, Inspector? I think I told you all there was to tell the last time you were here. However, please sit down.”

The kitchen was like an illustration from a ladies’ magazine. Large brick open fire place, plenty of brass and copper ornaments, wheelback chairs, refectory table and chintz curtains and easy-chair covers. Spry, a rough and ready sort of chap, must have been a bit out of character when he came in.

Laura was her usual seductive self in an expensive plain white blouse and a tailored skirt. Not a hair out of place, not a flaw in her complexion! But the colour in her cheeks was, this time, obviously not nature’s.

“I’ve still one or two points I want to settle, Miss Cruft. I didn’t mention them the other day, in the circumstances, but now I’d like proper answers.”

It was time for plain speaking, thought Littlejohn, and the sooner they got it over the better.

“Indeed, Inspector. I’m sure I’ve nothing to conceal and I’ll do my best.”

She made a show of indignation, but she was nervous still.

“I’m having difficulty in finding out the exact relationship between Free, Hunter, Blaize and a number of others.”

“What do you mean, Inspector?”

She was obviously set on brazening out the situation and Littlejohn felt annoyed.

“They were all your boy friends at one time or another, weren’t they?”

He said it with an asperity which even astonished himself.

“Don’t be horrible, Inspector.”

She gave him a melting look. Actually trying sex appeal on *him*!

“If we’re going to find out who killed your fiancé, I must know everything. Can’t you see, it might easily be a crime of jealousy?”

There was a pause.

“Do you mean that I might be the cause of the crime?”

“That might very well be the case.”

He said it brutally. She was definitely antagonistic and it was going to be a tussle of wills.

“I might as well tell you, Miss Cruft, that any number of people in this village are only too ready to tell me everything about your love affairs. I’d rather have it first-hand from you.”

Although she was nervous, she didn’t lose her head. Not a sign of temper, tears or resentment. Only a cold reserve and a measure of coquetry which was a part of her personality.

“You’d been engaged before, Miss Cruft?”

“Yes, I was engaged to Reg Poynter, but we agreed to break it off. He was an artist who lived here and we were always quarrelling about his strange ideas of life.”

“Where is Poynter now?”

“The last I heard, he was in London doing theatrical designing. That’s about eight months ago.”

“You’ve not seen him since your engagement was broken off?”

“No. He went away rather quickly.”

I’ll say he did, thought Littlejohn, remembering the hasty flitting and the debts left behind.

“And since then?”

“Really, Inspector, you seem to have a very poor opinion of me. To hear you, one would think I changed my mind every day.”

“I’m sorry, Miss Cruft, but we must get to the bottom of this. People are so anxious to assist that they fling all kinds of names at my head. It’s up to you to prove it’s only gossip, if that’s the case.”

“It’s always the same in a place like this. You can’t speak to a man without being accused of having an affair with him.”

“Hardly that. Nobody’s gone so far. But you were friendly with Hunter and Blaize before you started seriously with Free, weren’t you?”

She changed colour. The blood drained from her face and made the rouge stand out like daubs of paint.

Littlejohn wished he hadn’t linked the names of the two men together. Now he didn’t know which had produced the violent reaction.

“You weren’t engaged to either of *them*, were you?”

“Certainly not. If anyone’s told you that, they’re liars. There was a set of us knocked about together. In a gang like that there’s always a bit of family coach business. Sometimes you have one boy, sometimes another, but it’s never serious.”

“Isn’t it? But I’m told that at one time Blaize, and at another, Hunter was your particular boy friend. Is that so?”

“No. We went about a bit together on our own, but there was never anything really serious.”

“Are you sure?”

“What do you mean, Inspector? I think you’re being horrid.”

“I’m only trying my best to get at the truth.”

“You’re being very brutal about it.”

“I’m sorry, but I’ve been told that young Blaize started drinking heavily on account of the way you treated him.”

“It’s a damned lie. He always took more than was good for him. And now, Inspector, have you quite finished?”

"I'm afraid not, Miss Cruft. But if you don't want to continue, I'll be on my way. There's no telling, however, what you might be asked at the resumed inquest, and then it'll be under oath. It's much better for us to thrash it out here and now than in public. I'm only doing this for the best."

"What more do you want to know?"

Outside, the cattle were being brought in from pasture. The cowman was shouting about the yard, and the dog yapping and snapping after the cows. There was no sign of Spry.

"Were you fond of Hunter and he of you?"

A pause. The girl hesitated, gathered herself together and spoke more softly.

"Yes ... We were rather fond of each other, but we ... well ... we found we preferred someone else. Johnny's practically engaged to another girl in the village and I liked Ronald better."

"And Blaize ... was he very fond of you?"

"Oh, Tim was fond of so many girls. We never really took him seriously."

"But was he serious about you?"

"I don't know. He may have been, but he soon got over it. He's had several since."

It was fantastic. Talking over the affairs of heart of a girl in cold blood. Many a one would have dissolved into tears or bathed in sentiment. Not Laura. She kept her head remarkably well.

"What about Professor D'Arcy Lever? You and he have been talked about, you know."

"Good gracious! Whatever next? Why? The sole reason for our being seen together was that once I thought I'd like to stay on the staff at Melchester University ... The office staff, I mean, and it was suggested that I might become Professor Lever's secretary. He was without one at the time and ..."

"At any rate, people have talked about the pair of you."

"All wrong! As I said, in this place you've only ..."

"But are you sure the Professor thought the same as you?"

"I'm quite sure."

It didn't ring true, but Littlejohn saw no use in pushing the point further. But Laura was getting annoyed.

“It seems to me, Inspector, you’ve been talking with some of the village cats. Tearing my reputation to pieces whilst sewing for charity at the Dorcas classes. I think it’s a disgrace that you should listen to their foul insinuations. Why, they’ll be accusing me of killing Ronald next!”

“I’ve only come along to give you the chance of giving the lie to local gossip.”

“Are you satisfied?”

Littlejohn didn’t reply.

“I understand, Miss Cruft, that you enjoy an income under a trust created by your late father.”

“Yes. What’s that to do with Ronald being murdered?”

“In the event of your marriage, do you get full control of the funds?”

“Yes, if I’m not married I can’t touch the capital till I’m twenty-six. Rather strange, but I expect it was done for mummy’s sake and to give her a fair share of the income.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Well, it’s this way. Father left his money to me in trust, with income for life to mother as long as she lived, unless she married again. If she married, I got the income, till I was twenty-six. If, however, I married between twenty-one and twenty-six, the capital was released. A bit complicated, but I expect he thought if mummy married again she’d have someone to provide for her, and if I married before twenty-six I’d need the money, understand?”

“I think I follow.”

Another of those fussy sort of Wills which always bring a lot of trouble!

“And who are the trustees, if I may ask?”

“My mother and Mr. Fothergill, the lawyer in Holchester.”

“Do they look after the investments between them?”

“Yes, I think they do ... Why?”

“Does your stepfather have anything to do with the estate?”

“No; why should he? He helps mother with the clerical work sometimes, but otherwise ... Are you insinuating that ...?”

“I’m suggesting nothing, Miss Cruft. I’m only seeking as much information as I can gather on every angle of the case.”

“This seems a very funny angle.”

“Let me be the judge of that, Miss Cruft, please. I do assure you that I’m not just doing this out of idle curiosity. It’s all very important.”

“You get on well with your stepfather?”

“Very well, thanks; why?”

Littlejohn again seemed to have put his finger on a tender spot. Laura looked ruffled. The reason was not far to seek. Spry was a noisy, rough fellow. In fact, common. He might have appealed to Cruft’s widow, but to an educated girl like Laura, and one who fancied herself so much, his presence under the same roof must have been a bit of a trial. However ... she didn’t seem disposed to be enlightening. It wasn’t surprising, that. Littlejohn had asked a few pointed, intimate questions in that interview and after all there were limits.

The cows were now all tied-up and the steady throb of the milking machines was going.

“I think that’s all, Miss Cruft. I’ll be getting on my way. Thanks for your help.”

“I’m afraid I’ve been a bit rude to you now and then, Inspector, but really some of the questions you’ve asked are ones not usually put to a girl, are they?”

She was getting a bit arch! Littlejohn wondered what was coming.

“I quite agree they were perhaps a bit searching, but this is a tough case, Miss Cruft, and it’s going to be a hard one to solve. I want to know as much about Ronald Free and his life and associates as I can gather.”

“Have you any idea yet who might have done it, Inspector?”

So that was it! She was fishing for information, too.

“Not the faintest, yet, but I’m not despairing.”

“Why?”

“There’s never been, to my knowledge, a perfect crime, Miss Cruft. Murder particularly, is a new experience for most people. They’re not adepts at it. They’ve never had any real practice at killing before, so somewhere there’s a slip been made. We’ve got to find where it is in this case.”

“How interesting. I wonder how long it will take?”

“But I’m taking up your time, I must be off.”

The door opened, Mrs. Spry came in, looked questioningly at her daughter and then at Littlejohn.

“You’ve had a long session together.”

“Yes, mummy, the Inspector’s been putting me through a real third-degree.”

“Has he? I don’t believe it.”

A land girl carrying a pitchfork crossed the yard, apparently going for hay for the cattle from the barn.

“Well, I hope you’ll soon be at the end of your task, Inspector, with the murderer under lock and key,” said Mrs. Spry. She kept looking keenly at her daughter, wondering what she had been saying to the Inspector, and trying to size-up how she had been affected by his questioning.

Laura was herself again, fresh, well-poised and as cool as a cucumber.

The land girl, after a struggle with the door, disappeared in the barn. She was soon out again and yelling the place down.

“Mrs. Spry ... Mrs. Spry ... Mr. Spry’s in there ... He’s hung himself.”

Littlejohn found Spry dangling from a rope thrown over a beam. Quickly he cut him down. He hadn’t been there for long, for he was not quite dead. Luckily, Dr. Gell was at home. Before the doctor arrived Littlejohn had Spry looking like a living man through vigorous doses of artificial respiration.

Spry had left a note pinned on the back of the barn door.

*I can’t stand the disgrace. Everybody is blaming ‘Laura for Free’s death.*

*She seems to have no reputation to lose. I can’t face people.*

The whole thing was a bit of an anti-climax. The note written in a bold, illiterate hand. The attempted suicide just at a time when the hands were going in and out of the barn for fodder, and when Littlejohn climbed up to the beam to examine the rope he found it wasn’t even tied properly. With a bit of struggling and kicking Spry could have brought the whole lot down.

## 13.

### MELCHESTER UNIVERSITY

*Go to, go to—You have known what you should not.*

MACBETH

THE porter at the entrance to Melchester University studied Littlejohn's card with lofty surprise. The thought of that austere seat of learning being in any way connected with crime seemed to appal him.

The lodge was at the base of one of the twin towers which formed the main portals, like a miniature Tower Bridge. A hideous erection!

Melchester University had started ages ago as a sort of mechanics' institute and swollen to a conglomeration of buildings of diverse shapes and architecture. As each new professor of architecture took over his chair, he swore to do something about improving the rabbit warren, but soon, becoming assimilated, despairingly added his own quota to the heterogeneous mass. The current occupant of the chair was, at the time, absorbed in the erection of a new swimming-bath, housed in an edifice like a large, white, concrete box, within the shade of the huge gothic medical school.

The porter, who persisted in looking at Littlejohn as though he might have been an interloper trying to steal an honorary degree, at last condescended to see if Professor Lever would see him.

"He's a busy man," added the flunkey.

"So am I," retorted Littlejohn.

"No doubt you are. We all are," came the unabashed answer. Whereat the man commanded an underling to go to the psychology department and ask if the professor could see an Inspector from the police.



Finally, Littlejohn found himself being led across the quadrangle and down several long, echoing corridors bristling with marble busts of physicists, chemists, anatomists and physiologists. Somebody had irreverently put a shapeless felt hat on the head of one of them, and this the porter removed with a gasp of horror and placed in a window-bottom.

A crowd of young men and girls trooped out of a room smelling strongly of formalin and other noisome chemicals. Some of them were fixing up an evening's fun at the Palais de Danse, and one girl was loudly complaining that the "stiff" she had been dissecting was a poor one. She caught Littlejohn's eye as he passed and gave him a look which suggested that he might have been the body-snatcher who supplied it!

"Old Bernard vomited again this morning," a pretty girl was shouting. "He'll never go on with it. Hasn't the stomach. Ought to take a shot of seasick remedy before he goes in."

Littlejohn was used to corpses, mostly violently created, but this beat the band!

"The Professor's lecturing at present. He'll be free in a quarter of an hour."

They passed through swing doors into a vestibule, whence more doors radiated. The porter was hunting for somewhere to dump Littlejohn until the great man deigned to see him, when a small chap in flannel trousers and a shabby tweed coat entered.

"What is it, Smithson?"

The little man grew quite animated when he heard the reason for Littlejohn's visit.

"Come in. I'm just going to have some tea. Join me?"

They entered a small, untidy room constructed of glass partitions and with the occupant's name on the door.

DR. FASTNETT, READER IN PSYCHOLOGY.

Over teacups the pair of them got on quite well. Fastnett wanted to talk about the crime and didn't seem to have much respect for Professor Lever.

"I'm very interested in criminology. Especially in this case, which involves one of our students. Not that crime is my particular branch. I'm more for animal psychology when I've the time."

Littlejohn didn't know it, but the little man with the grey hair parted in the middle and blue pop-eyes was an international celebrity on the subject of conditioned reflexes in the higher anthropoids. His books were hailed as revolutionary masterpieces by all except the keepers of the monkey-houses at a number of zoos.

"Free used to be a student in the department. His girl was here, too. There's a rumour that it might be a crime of jealousy."

"So I believe, sir, although so far I've not come across confirmation of the theory."

"Perhaps not. The girl, Laura Cruft, was a bit of a disturbing influence here, I must confess. Sex appeal by the bucketful and always with a trail of admirers on her heels."

The Reader smiled, baring his teeth copiously and revealing gold and silver stoppings by the dozen. His small, straight nose screwed up when he grinned, resulting in a grimace like that of one of his baboons trying to scare off a rival.

"Miss Cruft almost stayed on in the department after she'd graduated. The Professor took a liking to her and there was some talk of her becoming his secretary. But it fell through."

"I wonder why?"

Dr. Fastnett looked round as though suspecting an eavesdropper might be concealed in a cupboard or listening at the keyhole.

"Well—in confidence, Inspector, I think Mrs. Professor put her foot down. She's on the staff here. Very clever woman. Matter of fact, better than her husband. She's made him what he is."

Professional jealousy, thought Littlejohn. Now we're going to hear something.

"Is that so? Interesting."

"Yes. You see she was the daughter of old Lightfoot, former professor of Mind and Method, as the chair was then called. The old man was in the first rank and his daughter followed in father's footsteps. Lever, who was a lecturer at the time, married Clarice Lightfoot with an eye to the main chance. She's made up for any deficiencies he might have."

"Such as?"

"Well, he's unprogressive. Not abreast of the times. Look at me. I'm leaving here next month. Matter of fact, going as assistant professor at an

American university. As I said, my line's animal psychology, but the old boy won't have any vivisection in his department. Well ... I ask you ... I want to carry on the experiments Pavlov did on dogs with the higher apes. I'm stumped here, though."

"What was that about Laura and the Professor? How came it that he wanted her for his secretary?"

"Got fond of her, I guess. Said she was a fine student. Nobody else saw anything extraordinary about her in the scholastic line, although in many other ways ... well ..."

Another display of metallic stoppings and grimaces.

"Was she a typist, then?"

"Started to learn, I believe, with a view to taking the job. She'd have had a soft time, I'll bet."

"And Mrs. Lever put a spoke in the wheel?"

"Nobody knows anything definite, but one day it was almost a *fait accompli*, the next it was all off. The old boy's sixty next birthday, twenty years older than his wife, but forty older than Laura. It's not likely that Clarice would stand for that, even if they didn't marry for love. She's jealous for the Professor's reputation, you know. Her own life work's bound up in it. There was some talking in the common-room and Clarice probably overheard it."

"H'm."

It was as bad in this exalted place as in the women's sewing meeting at Ravelstone. Gossip, spite, rumour, jealousy. The same tune beaten out by different bands!

The little man was looking uneasily at Littlejohn, as though realising that perhaps he'd said too much and that the Inspector was judging him unfavourably.

"I oughtn't to be talking like this, Inspector. May sound disloyal to the Chief. But, after all, you're here to find out all you can bearing on the case and you might as well have it from me plain and unvarnished as from the students or others less reliable with undesirable trimmings, mightn't you?"

"Of course, doctor. Of course."

They didn't get any farther. There was a tap on the door and Professor D'Arcy Lever entered. He gave Fastnett a curt nod, and stared hard at him as though questioning what he'd been up to.

Fastnett got quickly to his feet. If he didn't think much of Lever academically, he evidently believed in keeping on the right side of him.

The Professor's tall, loose frame seemed to fill the room. His shock of grey hair was ruffled and on end, for he had, when lecturing, a habit of passing his hand through it. His dishevelment or otherwise proclaimed the extent of the abstruseness of the lecture he had given.

"You wanted to see me, Inspector Littlejohn?"

"Yes, sir, if you please."

"Sorry to keep you waiting, but I see Fastnett's been entertaining you."

The last sentence was loaded with scorn. No love lost between the pair of them apparently.

They swept from the room, leaving the Reader high and dry and wondering what he'd done wrong.

The Professor's den was another glass pen at the far end of the laboratory, a large, airy room in which students were hard at work. In one corner a number of young men and girls were filing past a long-haired youth in corduroy trousers, red pullover and check jacket who seemed to be testing them for something. He shone a green light at them one by one and they pressed a key which rang a bell. Then he shone a red light at them and they did the same. All very puzzling!

At a secluded table in one corner a middle-aged man was busy doing something with a contraption like a roulette wheel. Littlejohn caught his eye as he passed him. He looked at the same time feverish and triumphant. It might have been something psycho-mathematical, or again, the man might have been ambitious to stroll down the Bois de Boulogne with an independent air!

"That is an experiment in the theory of chance," elucidated Lever as they passed. "Nothing to do with my department. A little hospitality to the mathematics side, which is short of space."

Littlejohn had never regretted becoming a detective. Now he thanked God for the job he'd chosen! If this was the pursuit of learning, he preferred chasing criminals!

"What did you want of me, Inspector?"

D'Arcy Lever's long, bony face never relaxed. It was like a pale mask, cold, bloodless, inscrutable.

“Ronald Free used to be a student of yours, sir, and I wondered if you could throw any light on past incidents which might be connected with the crime I’m investigating. I mean, perhaps something occurred whilst he was here.”

“I can’t help you, Inspector. I don’t enjoy the confidences of my students. I’m here to direct their studies, not to probe into the secrets of their private lives.”

“I thought that as a psychologist ...”

“Tut, tut. Everybody seems to think that. Because my subject happens to be human behaviour, that’s no reason why people should endow me with abnormal powers of divination. I don’t know what’s going on in other people’s hearts any more than any other Tom, Dick or Harry. So, if you expect some startling revelations, you’ve come to the wrong man.”

“No, no. Don’t misunderstand me, sir. Surely you must, during their time under your wing, be able to judge and sum up most of your students.”

“Haven’t I said I know nothing that would help you in the case you’re investigating. I’m afraid we’re both wasting our time.”

It was like trying to get blood out of a stone. If the old boy knew anything, he was certainly not going to disclose it.

Well, there was nothing else for it. Lever would have to have it.

“I’ve been told that at one time you offered Free’s fiancée a post as secretary on your staff, sir.”

The mask-like face with its loose skin turned from parchment to pale pink. With all his psychology, Lever hadn’t quite got a grip on his emotions. The heavy lips fell apart for a second. Then he was himself again.

“Who’s told you that tale?”

“Quite a number of people. It’s common property.”

“It is, is it? Well, there was a time when I thought Miss Cruft would suit me as a typist and helper, but I changed my mind. She wasn’t sufficiently trained technically. I mean, as typist and filing clerk.”

Lever looked hard at Littlejohn to see how he accepted the story.

Littlejohn maintained a poker face.

“You were a friend of Miss Cruft I hear, sir.”

More signs of pinkness appeared among the parchment.

“And what if I was? She was a student of mine. I knew her late father. I’m old enough to be her grandfather. If giving Miss Cruft a lift home in my

car when we both live in the same village is to be a cause for local scandal, then it's time people had something better to do."

The Professor was getting quite heated. It didn't need a psycho-analyst to guess why, and Littlejohn decided to pursue the matter no further.

"I'm sorry, sir. I didn't mean to disturb you. I quite agree there's been far too much gossip circulating since the crime. It's very difficult sorting out the wheat from the chaff."

"I'm sure it is, Inspector."

Lever was himself again.

"Forgive the heated protest. Really, the amount of silly talk and surmise created by this crime, which is probably just a vulgar murder by a tramp or somebody ..."

"I don't think that, sir. I think it's a premeditated crime, deliberately planned and executed in cold blood ..."

"Do you really? How extraordinary!"

"... And purely as a matter of routine, sir, may I ask you if you yourself were out in the village at the time of the murder? Say between nine-thirty and ten."

This time D'Arcy Lever went purple. The veins of his forehead bulged, his long, heavy lips writhed and he drew in his large nose with wrinkles of distaste.

"How dare you! How dare you try to link me with the crime! If this is all you've called for, Inspector, I wish you a very good afternoon. Close the door behind you."

But the professor wasn't getting away with it as easily as that.

Another door behind D'Arcy Lever's chair had opened and there stood a tall, buxom woman with greying fair hair, a heavy, clever face and calm, hazel eyes. She wore a blue jumper and a grey tweed skirt and looked as though she'd dressed and done her hair in a hurry.

"Whatever's the matter here, my dear? You know you shouldn't get so excited. You've been warned."

"I'll trouble you not to interfere, Clarice. This is a private discussion between Inspector Littlejohn here and myself, and as he's chosen to be offensive I've shown him the door."

The calm, hazel eyes met Littlejohn's and twinkled.

"Offensive? Surely not! What have you been doing to him, Inspector?"

“I’ll trouble you not to meddle, Clarice. I’ve just refused to answer some of his silly questions and told him to go. I’ll be much obliged if you will do as I wish, Littlejohn. I’ve work to do. Good day.”

Clarice D’Arcy Lever continued as though her husband had not spoken.

“What do you want to know, Inspector?”

Her voice had taken on a harsh edge.

“I’m trying to find out who was about the village at the time of the crime, which was between nine-thirty and ten.”

“The Free murder, you mean?”

“Of course.”

“Why?”

“I want to interview all who might have been near the spot. I asked your husband if he was out in the village. I wasn’t seeking an alibi; merely possible information. Professor Lever chose to get annoyed with me.”

“No point in being obstructive, my dear,” said Mrs. Lever incisively. “You know you were out in the village. You left me with the galleys to read and went off ...”

The professor thumped his table in temper.

“I will not suffer this inquisition! I’ll speak to the Chief Constable. As if I’d murdered the man myself! I admit I went out for a walk, but I didn’t go near Gallows Hill. I went the other way.”

“Did anybody see you, sir?”

“No. They didn’t. And I don’t want to see any more of *you*.”

With that, the professor stumped off and joined the crowds of students still busy with their red and green lamps and time-clock.

“So that’s that. Sorry, I can’t help you at all. So I’ll wish you good day and good luck, Inspector.”

Clarice D’Arcy Lever therupon made off with great dignity and left Littlejohn in full possession.

Leaving the clock merchants and the man who was trying to break the bank at Monte Carlo hard at it, Littlejohn found his way out, past all the marble busts, past the scornful academic lackeys, under Tower Bridge, and into the fresh air again.

He was glad that was over!

## 14.

### ONE THING AND ANOTHER

*“There when they came, whereas those tricky towers,  
Where now the studious lawyers have their bowers.”*

EDMUND SPENSER

“How are things going, Littlejohn?”

Superintendent Glaisher flung his long body loosely in a chair, looked round for somewhere to put his feet, and finally hoisted them on to the mantelpiece.

They were sitting in the deserted bar parlour of *The Bird in Hand* and Glaisher had been apologising for his apparent lack of interest in the case, due to pressure of routine work in Melchester. The Bishop had had burglars, who had stolen, *inter alia*, a silver pectoral cross, a muffin dish, three gold medals won by the right reverend at basketball, and a top hat. The Bishop had been in and out of the police station half a dozen times a day. It had kept them on their toes.

“Not too well, I’m afraid, sir. In fact, to be colloquial, not a pot washed!”

Glaisher tipped his chair and rocked to and fro on the back legs.

“Oh, come, come! Not as bad as that. You’ve been working hard ...”

“Yes. And got nothing but a lot of silly gossip for our pains. We’ve sorted out one or two interesting points, however. I suppose you know Spry tried to hang himself yesterday. Made a poor job of it; but there you are. He’s in rather bad shape nervously and the doctor says he’s not to be bothered until later in the day. I’m going round to the farm in a little while.”

“What’s behind it?”



“Haven’t an idea. The suicide note, if you can call it such, said he couldn’t stand the gossip about Laura. Personally, I think that’s all rot. Spry’s had something on his mind for quite a time and this is the result.”

“But the report said it was a bit of a botched-up job. Rope not tied properly, and done at a time when the farmhands were about and likely to discover him ... Think it was a faked bit of work?”

“No, I don’t. I think Spry found I’d called again and his conscience smote him so hard that he went off hot-foot to put an end to his misery. Something’s preying on that chap’s mind and we’ve got to find out what it is.”

“You’ve a nice job on, Littlejohn. Can I do anything?”

Outside, a funeral was drawing up at the churchyard. Prominent among the mourners was the heavy form of P.C. Butt. They were burying old Nehemiah, and William had been discharged from hospital on the previous day. When the old man had been put to rest Butt and his wife were off for a few days’ holiday. He had been given a week’s sick-leave. Mrs. Butt was attired from head to foot in black. She didn’t seem to be paying much attention to the ceremony. Her eyes were fixed solicitously on her husband, as though she expected him to have a relapse at any moment. From the windows of the inn they could see the Rev. Tancred Turncote busy with the commital.

“Want to see Butt about anything before he goes off to the seaside, Littlejohn?”

“No, I don’t think so. I had a word with him earlier. He’s very put out about the disappearance of the report about Costain and his partridges. He thinks he might have lost it and if somebody finds it and passes it on to you or the Chief Constable, Costain will be for it. You’ll see that that affair doesn’t go any farther, won’t you?”

“Sure. We’ve no time for such like trifles these days. In any case, under similar provocation I’d have screwed the damned birds’ necks myself. Only don’t tell Costain I said so.”

“I questioned Butt closely about that report. It seems obvious that somebody, after hearing Butt shouting about it in the village, thought it contained evidence about the murder, and attacked Butt to get it. Butt assured me that only himself, Costain and I know what the letter contained.

His father, he's sure, said nothing of it to anybody, because they more or less kept the old man doped. He was noisy and upset everybody about him."

"So somebody might have that report still?"

"I hardly think so. Probably destroyed it in a hurry when they saw that it was harmless. All the same, it's as well to remember the point."

"What about a drink, Inspector?"

"Right."

"Two pints of mild, Edna."

Glaisher uncrossed his legs to receive his tankard and then corkscrewed them again on the mantelpiece.

"Anything in the way of routine work we can be doing at Melchester?"

"Could you find out something about Spry for me? Where he comes from? I hear he's not a local man. And anything else concerning him. There's a nigger in the woodpile there and we must get to the bottom of it. If necessary, I'll send a man down to Spry's home town to dig out all he can."

"I'll see to that. Anything else?"

"Have you got your car?"

"Yes."

"Give me a lift to Melchester, then, if you don't mind. I want a word with Fothergill, solicitor to the late Cruft's estate. I wonder if Spry's been up to something there ..."

"D'you think he imagined you were on to something about the estate and hurried off to hang himself?"

Glaisher grinned, a feat which raised his moustache like a trapdoor, revealing two large fanged canine teeth surrounded by batches of false ones.

"I don't know. It seems damned strange that he should leave such a silly suicide note. I wonder if he's fond of Laura ... In a fatherly way, I mean, and couldn't stand her being slandered. I'll have to find out. Well, if you'll take me to Melchester, I'll get my business done and then call to see Spry."

"Come on, then."

Glaisher unfolded himself and got to his feet with a groan. A very small car was parked in the car-park, and it took the two detectives all their time to get into it. Glaisher's knees reached to his chin and he had to hold the wheel over the top of them.

“Can’t you do anything better than this, Superintendent?” asked Littlejohn jocularly.

“My car’s in dock. Be thankful for small mercies! This is my wife’s. Damned silly little thing, but it goes.”

They rattled off.

Fothergill, Turncote, Blades, Comfrey and Fothergill were the diocesan solicitors. Their chambers were adjacent to the cathedral close in a place which had once been a pilgrims’ hostel. Turncote, Blades, Comfrey and one Fothergill had died long ago, and the surviving relic on the eroded brass plate at the door had one foot in the grave. Mr. Bartlemy Fothergill had two middle-aged nephews in the firm. They were known as young Mr. Tom and young Mr. Christopher, and, although partners in the business, had not yet graduated to having a share in the name-plate. Mr. Bartlemy ruled them with a rod of iron, and insisted on seeing all important clients himself, although he was deaf.

He received Littlejohn in a room overlooking the cathedral. Photographs of about a dozen dead bishops and deans on the walls, all in gaiters, and over the mantelpiece a huge portrait of Mr. Marmaduke Fothergill, founder of the firm, dressed in wig and gown. He ought to have worn gaiters, too!

The solicitor’s desk was littered with frowsy documents, parchments, sheepskins, red tape and seals. The débris was about a foot high and there wasn’t an inch of space to be seen except just in front of the solicitor and covered by a dirty blotter loaded with very inkstained paper.

Mr. Fothergill himself looked like a high ecclesiastical dignitary. Ascetic sacerdotal face of a beautiful pink complexion; white hair, blue eyes, noble brow. He didn’t know very much about law himself. He was the dignified mouthpiece of the machine which worked in the other rooms of the firm.

“Good morning, sir,” said Littlejohn.

Mr. Fothergill made no move. He was writing in cramped fashion deep in the litter of his desk. When he raised his head he seemed quite surprised to see his visitor.

“Good morning,” he said in a fruity voice. He then unearthed a contraption like a small camera from somewhere among the rubbish, set it down on the top of a pile of ecclesiastical conveyances, with the hole in the

end of it pointing in Littlejohn's direction, and put on a small pair of earphones.

"Speak in that ... I'm deaf."

"Very good, sir."

"Eh?"

"I said very good, sir."

There was a religious atmosphere about the chambers, and it seemed almost like brawling in church to shout about the place, but Littlejohn did so until he was hoarse. They must have been able to hear him in the Lady Chapel at the far end of the cathedral.

Either the appliance was in disrepair or the batteries were exhausted, because Mr. Bartlemy didn't seem able to get the Inspector's wavelength at all. It was like a hideous night mare to Littlejohn and at times he felt so impotent that he could have taken to his heels in despair. However, an aged clerk, whose low murmuring seemed exactly what the diabolical contraption wanted, was called to the rescue and he acted as interpreter.

"You don't speak loud enough, Inspector," explained Mr. Fothergill.

The interview, with repetitions, interruptions, interpretations and elucidations, including the calling-in of the dapper Mr. Tom and the decrepit Mr. Chris for consultation, took over an hour and at the end of it it was unanimously agreed that without Mr. Fothergill's concurrence the funds of the Cruft estate could not be disturbed. Embezzlement was quite out of the question. The funds were locked-up in gilt-edged registered securities, jointly in the names of Fothergill and Mrs. Spry. It was absurd to think that anybody could get at them without Mr. Bartlemy's consent. And that consent hadn't been given. So the funds were quite intact. Q.E.D.

And would remain so till kingdom come, thought Littlejohn, eagerly extricating himself from the family conference which had developed. Mr. Bartlemy had suddenly remembered that he hadn't done the current income-tax claim for the Cruft estate, and was roundly upbraiding Mr. Tom and Mr. Christopher for their neglect. The two "young" men were busy shouting apologies into the black box and Mr. Bartlemy was shouting that he couldn't hear a word and didn't want to, either.

"Good morning, and thank you, gentlemen," said Littlejohn, making for the door.

Nobody replied except Mr. Bartlemy, who was supposed to be deaf.

“Good morning to you, Inspector. A great pleasure, I’m sure.”

As Littlejohn closed the door, Mr. Fothergill senior looked to be giving his unruly nephews a hundred lines apiece.

At the police station, Glaisher, his feet on the window sill, gave Littlejohn some information about Spry, which he had quickly obtained. It wasn’t of very much importance, except that it disclosed that the man came from Dintling in Worcestershire. He had been a farm bailiff at Ravelstone for about fifteen years and had married Mrs. Cruft about two years after her husband’s death. There was nothing against him at all. Normally, a quiet, civil fellow, he knew his business and ran the farm well.

Later, Costain confirmed that Spry got on very comfortably with his step-daughter. In fact, they were on the best of terms.

Spry was still in bed when Littlejohn called at Apple Tree Farm. Laura was out and Mrs. Spry let him in.

“I can’t think what came over him to do a thing like that,” she said. “He’s been a bit edgy for a little time now. Farming’s a worrying job these days and it’s all bed and work. But I never thought he’d got so bad with his nerves. All this murder business has got him down. He’s very fond of Laura and the gossip and what-not have been disgusting.”

She wept a little. She wanted somebody to confide in, and seemed comforted by telling Littlejohn about it.

Spry was fit to be seen and very sheepish.

“I don’t know what come over me,” he said. “Must have gone temporary insane. One minute I was crossin’ the yard; next I was swingin’ from the rope. Brain must ’ave give way.”

The bedclothes were up to his chin and his large hands clutched the sheets firmly. He hadn’t had a shave for two days and looked wild and haggard.

The room was large and airy. Plain furniture, good carpet on the floor, and old-fashioned pictures and framed biblical texts on the walls. Over the fireplace a large portrait of what must have been Mr. Cruft. His eyes had almost faded out, but he had a plentiful growth of whiskers which had survived so far. How Spry could stand the cold, eyeless gaze of his predecessor all through the night and when he got up in the morning, Littlejohn couldn’t imagine! It would certainly have got on *his* nerves. Still, some people have nerves for one thing and some for another.

“You’d been worrying about Laura?”

Spry’s shifty eyes roved anywhere but straight.

“Yes.”

“Are you sure that was all? Nothing else upsetting you? Because if there is, Mr. Spry, let me know.”

“There’s nothing else. Why should there be?”

“I’m not saying there is, but I just asked in case.”

“Well, there isn’t. An’ I don’t feel well enough to answer a lot of questions. I’m in enough trouble as it is.”

“What do you mean ... trouble?”

“Well, I suppose there’ll be a court case about this attempted suicide. Laura says it’s a criminal offence. I don’t know. What am I goin’ to do? It’ll drive me off my head ... I’ll make a proper job of it next time ... See if I don’t.”

Mrs. Spry started weeping. A proper emotional scene.

“Don’t say that, David. Don’t, please. I can’t stand it, if you do. You promised me you wouldn’t.”

“Well, they shouldn’t keep botherin’ me. What have I done to be bothered? One thing and another, I don’t know whether I’m on my head or my heels.”

He started weeping himself, a noisy, dry howling which shook the bed and convulsed his face frightfully.

“There, there ...”

Mrs. Spry dried her own tears and started comforting her husband. That seemed to be what he wanted. He calmed down, but didn’t take any further heed of Littlejohn. The Inspector followed Mrs. Spry downstairs.

“You see, he’s not himself at all. He’ll have to go away for a holiday after this.”

“Yes. He seems very upset about something. Do you know what it is, Mrs. Spry?”

“Didn’t he say? He’s very fond of Laura and all this business has been a big trouble to him. He’s brooded over it.”

“Was he indoors at the time of the crime, Mrs. Spry?”

The woman’s jaw fell and her eyes flashed.

“You don’t think ...?”

“Of course not. I’m checking times everywhere. He might have been out and able to give me some useful information.”

“He wasn’t indoors, that’s certain. He always goes out just before bedtime to see that all’s locked up and the stock safe and comfortable for the night. About nine o’clock he does his rounds. He’d be out then when the murder was committed. But he’d nothing to do with it. You don’t think that?”

“No, no. Thank you for the information. I must have another word with your husband when he’s more able to talk. Sorry I’ve caused such a commotion, but it had to be done.”

Littlejohn didn’t feel very contrite. He was sure that Spry had kicked up more fuss than was necessary in order to avoid close questions.

Outside, Dr. Gell’s two-seater drew in the yard. He was calling to see his patient. Littlejohn thought he had better be going.

“Put your husband’s mind at rest about court proceedings. The doctor will probably be able to help ... Nerves worn out, you know, or something such. Hullo, doctor, I’m just telling Mrs. Spry that you’ll no doubt be able to smooth things over if any proceedings crop up in connection with her husband’s recent affair.”

“Hullo, Inspector. You here? He oughtn’t to be bothered much yet. Yes, I’ll probably be able to smooth things over. He’s been off with his nerves before and he’s certainly been in very poor shape lately.”

“I’m sure he didn’t know properly what he was doing,” said Mrs. Spry. “He wouldn’t have done it right where the farm hands were coming and going if he’d had his wits about him, would he?”

“No. It seemed to be just an impulse ... A sort of brain-storm, I should think ... Overwrought, you know. Well, I must be going. Goodbye, Mrs. Spry, and thank you. Good day, doctor.”

Littlejohn met Laura coming up the garden path. She looked as if she’d seen a ghost.

“You all right, Miss Cruft? You look all-in.”

“I’m all right, Inspector, thanks. It’s daddy ... It’s upset me awfully.”

Littlejohn said no more, but went on his way. All the same, he wondered if her tale were true.

## 15.

### THE STRICKEN COUPLE

*“I saw the strong man bowed down and his knees to fail.”*

CHARLES LAMB

WILLIAM FREE pushed away his plate with most of its contents untouched, walked to the window and, thrusting aside the lace curtains, stared at the road without seeing anything.

It was as though he were expecting Ronald to come home.

His wife, making a show of eating something, watched him out of the corner of her eye. Then she, too, left her food and sat with her hands in her lap, saying nothing.

Thus Littlejohn found them. The bottom knocked out of their lives and everything in ruins.

They did their best to make him welcome and invited him to a cup of tea from the pot on the hob.

Littlejohn hardly knew how to begin. He looked at the unfinished meal, the haggard, hopeless faces of the stricken Frees and felt his gorge rise. If only he could lay his hands on the swine who ...

There was a good fire burning, casting a mellow light on the old-fashioned mahogany sideboard, dining-table and chairs. The brasses and pot dogs shone on the mantelpiece. On the hearthrug a little tabby cat industriously licked her paws and washed behind her ears. Littlejohn watched her. Her busy, detached air gave relief to the tension of the rest of the place. She rose, arched her back, purred and pranced round the Inspector's trousers, rubbing herself against them with great satisfaction.



Old Free's eyes were bloodshot and dark-ringed from lack of sleep. He had nothing at all to say for himself. His only comfort was in work. He excused himself.

"I've to finish a job for to-night," he said. "I'll be gettin' on ... Nothin' I can tell you ..."

He stumbled out of the room and soon could be heard rummaging among his stock of timber and using a saw.

Littlejohn felt embarrassed. It was like rubbing salt into a raw wound. But it had to be done.

Relief arrived from an unexpected quarter. There was a tap on the door and a tall, straight-backed, scraggy woman entered without waiting to be admitted. Her eyelids were inflamed and she kept blinking and twitching her face as though they annoyed her.

"I called to see if I could get you anythin', Anne. I'm on my way to Melchester ..."

She looked Littlejohn up and down searchingly and boldly, as though challenging his right to be there at all. She wore a long, shabby brown coat and a hat like a pancake fixed on a skullcap. In her large, bony hands she gripped a shopping basket tightly, as though expecting it to be snatched.

"My cousin Sarah ... This is Mr. Littlejohn from the police."

Sarah drew up a chair and joined the conference without waiting for an invitation. She seemed used to doing as she liked about the place. There was a lull in the conversation. Everyone seemed to be waiting for somebody else to start the ball rolling.

Littlejohn slowly filled his pipe, lit it, crossed his legs and stared gloomily into the fire. An atmosphere of dejection filled the room. Mrs. Free sat motionless, her hands in her lap, waiting for the Inspector to talk about his business.

There was an old-fashioned, small case-clock on the mantelpiece, with a painted dial and a steel pendulum showing beneath it through the glass door.

Ti-tock, ti-tock, ti-tock ... As though some part of the works were out of balance and ready to stop at any moment.

"I seem to have interrupted the conversation ... If I'm in the way I'll be off ..."

Sarah was getting peevish. Unable to tear herself away out of sheer curiosity, yet getting jumpy because things were hanging fire.

“No, don’t go. Sarah’s all right, Mr. Littlejohn. You can talk in front of her. She’s one of the family.”

Sarah nodded her head vigorously and tightened her lips, defying anybody to prove it otherwise.

“I just wondered, Mrs. Free, if you’d any idea as to why anyone should want to kill your son.”

Tears filled the woman’s eyes again and she shook her head helplessly, unable to speak.

“Why should anybody want to murder Ronnie?” said Sarah. “He was a good boy. Everybody liked him.”

“But someone must have hated him or what he had done so much, that ...”

“I can’t see a single person hating Ronald.”

“Was he all right, Mrs. Free, when he left home to meet Miss Cruft?”

“Yes. He seemed very happy. Things were going well between him and Laura.”

“Hadn’t they always gone well?”

Mrs. Free hesitated.

Ti-tock. Ti-tock. Ti-tock.

Sarah bent closer across the table, intent on not missing a word.

“His father and me didn’t like it. We thought she wasn’t the girl for him.”

“Why?”

“Well ... She’d had a few before and thrown them over. Never seemed to be able to make up her mind proper. We didn’t want Ronnie always like a cat on hot bricks wondering ... wondering if he was going to be the next to be thrown over. He’d his career and needed all his wits to make his way. Besides ...”

“Yes?”

“Besides ... I suppose all parents are alike. No girl’s good enough. But she seemed to us to be the sort who’d be fonder of a good time than a husband and home and children.”

“I see.”

“Yes,” said Sarah. Littlejohn didn’t quite know what she was affirming, but she seemed quite settled in her own mind in approving some point or other.

“So he didn’t seem to have any worries the last time you saw him?”

“No ... If we’d known about all this, we’d have let him alone. Better Laura than ...”

The stricken woman was weeping again. Sarah rose and comforted her, glaring at Littlejohn in reproach.

Mrs. Free sniffed back her tears and dried her eyes.

“I’m sorry,” she said simply. “Was there anythin’ else, sir?”

“I’m sorry, too, Mrs. Free. It’s all very distressing to me to have to keep asking these trying questions, but I’ve got my duty ...”

“Of course you have.”

“Of course you ’ave,” echoed Sarah like a chairman giving a casting vote, finally and defiantly.

“And Ronald hadn’t mentioned anybody quarrelling with him ... about his love-affair, shall we say?”

“No. Johnny Hunter was wild about it at first. He was keen on Laura, I’m told. They quarrelled, but soon made it up agen. Johnny’s a nice boy. The sort who wouldn’t hold anythin’ against anybody for long.”

“That’s right,” affirmed Sarah, blinking her eyes ferociously and then contorting her face as though having difficulty in drawing the lids apart.

Outside, the road was very busy. Drovers bringing cattle from the morning’s stock auctions in Melchester, and cars and turnouts on their ways to town for the afternoon’s produce markets. A large, red bus thundered past.

“That’s my bus ... I’ll ’ave another half-hour to wait now,” asserted Sarah, settling down more cosily in her chair, determined to be comfortable while she waited. “I see Mrs. Fairfield was on it. Promised to meet ’er, I did. Owe her two and six. Spent all me money last week and had to borrer from ’er. I’d better call and pay me debts to-night.”

The name had a familiar ring to Littlejohn.

“Let me see, isn’t that the mother of the girl Johnny Hunter’s courting?”

“Yes. Funny sort o’ courtin’ too, if you ask me. Mrs. Fairfield’s proper bothered about it. Told me so last week. In confidence, of course. I can

speaking my mind here, I know. Neether of you'll say a word outside ... So I'll not be breakin' me word."

Littlejohn smiled. That's the way it was. Secrets whispered under solemn oath of not telling a soul soon all over the shop!

Sarah was going it full steam ahead.

"... Mrs. Fairfield's that worried about their Jessie. The girl's mad about Johnny and sometimes you'd think he was the same about 'er, Mrs. Fairfield tells me. And then, suddenly, he'll change. Speak cynical to her, kiss 'er and turn nasty, and all that ..."

Mrs. Free, her mind taken from her own troubles, showed sudden interest.

"Surely Jessie's not been tellin' all that sort o' stuff?"

Sarah shot out her neck like a hen drinking.

"Oh yes, she 'as. Mrs. F. says she can't sleep o' nights for worry and she's been up a time or two in the small hours comfortin' her. You tell things in the small hours you wouldn't in the day."

Littlejohn could well imagine a sort of third-degree on affairs of heart in the middle of the night!

"In case you don't know it, Inspector, Mrs. Fairfield's the late schoolmaster's widow. Her and her two daughters live in the old schoolhouse, the present schoolmistress living in a flat in the village. They take in a lodger, you see, an' only having three bedrooms, Jessie and her mother use the same room. That's how it is her mother knows she can't sleep."

Mrs. Free explained it all pat. Littlejohn wondered if any secrets at all were hid from the matriarchal council of Ravelstone! Perhaps they even knew who'd killed Free! And wouldn't tell a foreigner!!

Sarah wasn't going to be stopped in the middle of a juicy narrative. She raised her voice, which mingled with and finally routed that of Mrs. Free.

"... I sez to 'er, 'Mrs. Fairfield,' I sez, 'Mrs. Fairfield, there's on'y one explanation for that. Johnny's took her on the rebound from Laura Cruft. It often happens that way. When a man can't get the girl he wants, he turns to another and pretends to himself she's the girl he couldn't have, and then when he sees she isn't, he turns nasty'."

This profound piece of sex psychology was delivered with great gravity and a final toss of the head which defied argument. Sarah began to rock

herself to and fro in the rocking-chair, her hands and arms embracing her abdomen like a sufferer from colic.

Ti-tock. Ti-tock. Ti-tock.

Next door Free could be heard hammering. You could follow his every movement. Selecting a nail, holding it in position and then giving it a heavy clout and a series of minor ones.

“Mrs. Fairfield wouldn’t have it of course, but I know.”

Sarah was unmarried and, therefore, as an onlooker, saw most of the game!

“I know, I say. Known all along. If I was Jessie, I’d show him a thing or two. Keepin’ wake o’ nights for a chap like Hunter! And her could have half the single men hereabouts if she lifted ’er little finger. Silly thing!”

They were now embarked on a right good gossip. Littlejohn refilled and lit his pipe, stretched his legs and made himself comfortable. It wouldn’t do any harm to listen-in even if it did no good. The little cat, with a sudden impulse, leapt on his knees and settled down.

“Push ’er off, sir,” said Mrs. Free. “She’s always doin’ that. Come down now, Edna.”

“Edna?”

“Yes. Ronnie called her that. Said she’d a face like the barmaid at *The Bird in Hand*.”

The cat stuck its claws through the Inspector’s trousers right into his skin in its ecstasies.

Sarah was still in full spate.

“... Mrs. Fairfield was proper put-out when I told ’er that. ‘The girl’s missing one good catch as I know of,’ I sez. ‘That writer chap on Gallows Hill’s crazy about ’er, an’ well you know it.’”

“Who?” asked Littlejohn, now up to the neck in gossip and enjoying it like any old woman.

“Chap that has a bungalow on Gallows Hill. Long ... no, Shortt ... Shortt, that’s it. George Shortt. Well-known writer, they tell me. I never read books, so I can’t say, but they tell me he’s famous and makes thousands out of his novels every year.”

“Never heard of him!”

“You wouldn’t, not as George Shortt. Writes under a nomdiploom. Maude Temple, or something. A woman’s name! Doesn’t sound right, does

it? Like a man dressin' in woman's clothes. But it earns him a fortune, so what's the odds."

Littlejohn remembered the books. Circulating libraries full of them, and customers clamouring for more. Strong romances where the hero didn't ask for the woman, he *took* her ...!

"Yes. George Shortt's mad on Jessie. Followin' her about with sheep's eyes and bowin' and smilin' and lookin' love-lorn whenever he sees her in the village. 'She doesn't know which side her bread's buttered,' I sez to Mrs. Fairfield. "Losin' a chance like that for the sake of Johnny Hunter, who can't make up his mind who he does want'."

"But if she doesn't love Mr. Shortt," pleaded Mrs. Free.

The sex psychologist had an answer to that.

"Better take one who loves you than one who doesn't. You know where you are then. She'd come to love 'im later. I told Mrs. Fairfield that straight. I've seen that 'appen more than once't. Wasn't born yesterday ..."

Sarah rocked furiously and screwed her eyes violently.

"I wish I knew that Shortt to speak to. I'd give 'im a piece of my mind."

She leaned forward confidentially and made her points strongly prodding her left palm with a stiff bony forefinger.

"... They tell me in his books the men know what they want and *take* it. No arguin' for his women. Just swept off their feet by force of passion."

She threw out her arms in enthusiasm and flicked her eyelids furiously.

"Not that *I* read 'em. But them that do tell me it's true. Pity 'e can't take a dose of his own medicine and show Miss Jessie Fairfield wot's wot."

"So you don't think Hunter's in love with Jessie, then?" Littlejohn put it casually. He didn't quite know why he asked the question, but somehow, at the time, it seemed important.

"Not a bit of it ... Just showin' Laura Cruft that there's as good fish in the sea ... And mark my words, mark my words, now that Laura's free again, Jessie's heart's goin' to be broke more than ever. She'd better take that Shortt chap while the going's good ... Johnny'll be round Apple Tree Farm agen as sure as eggs is eggs ..."

Free had finished his hammering and appeared in the house again. He looked as dazed and listless as ever.

"Hello, Sarah," he muttered.

"Hello, Will. How are things? Nicely, I hope."

The old man made no reply. He seemed to be looking for something and to have forgotten what it was.

“Could I have a cup o’ tea, mother? I feel that a good cup o’ tea might ...”

“Certainly, Will. I’ll make one right away. Sit down, dad, do. Don’t keep on ...”

The wretched couple looked helplessly at each other.

“Will you have a cup of tea, Inspector?... Sarah?”

“No, thank you, Mrs. Free. I must be going.”

“Is that clock right, Anne? I must be goin’ too! My bus is due. Mustn’t miss that or else ...”

Sarah gathered her belongings and hurried off with hardly another word, pausing at the door only for a final warning.

“You’ll not tell a soul wot I said about Jessie Fairfield.”

Free, who had been wandering about with his hat on, removed it, revealing a livid weal where the brim had bitten into his forehead. He sat at the table dumbly waiting for his drink.

“Sure you won’t have a cup, Mr. Littlejohn?”

“Quite sure, thanks, Mrs. Free. I’ve spent enough time already and must be off.”

He shook hands with the pair of them.

As he gripped Littlejohn’s hand, Old Free suddenly flamed into life.

“I hope you soon find who done it. I wish to thank you ... If only I could lay these hands on ...”

The veins in his forehead stood out like cords and his face grew livid.

“There, there, dad. Don’t take on so. It’s over and done with past mendin’ now, dear. Revenge and bitterness won’t bring him back.”

Littlejohn left them comforting each other.

## 16.

### THE WAX IMAGE

*“The devil teacheth how to make pictures of wax, that by the roasting thereof, the persons that they bear the names of be continually melted by continual sickness.”*

KING JAMES I.: *Daemonology*

P.C. COSTAIN cut across the fields to the old school house. It took five minutes less than going all the way by road to the front door.

He was on his way to confirm Johnny Hunter’s alibi with Jessie Fairfield.

The back door of the cottage gave right onto a small lawn and Costain made little noise as he approached. The door was open but there was nobody in the scullery in the rear of the place. Costain was just raising his fist to knock when a dull muttering caused him to pause with his fist in mid-air like a zealot giving the Communist salute.

The constable held his breath and listened. The sound he heard made the hair rise in the nape of his neck.

Somebody was reciting the Lord’s Prayer backwards!

You couldn’t teach Costain anything about witchcraft. Home in Ballaugh there were old women who could still tell the mainlanders a thing or two about blasting crops and making cows give blue milk. Many a time as a child he had been taken home and screamed himself to sleep after a session before the fire listening to his grandmother’s tales.

Gripping his thumbs between his first and second fingers, as taught by his mother long ago in such circumstances, Costain tiptoed in the direction of the incantation.



Mrs. Fairfield was kneeling in front of the living-room fire, slowly turning round and round in her fingers before the flames a small, cylindrical object. She was so preoccupied with the task in hand that the bobby was upon her and had snatched what she was holding before she knew he was there.

“Mrs. Fairfield! Mrs. Fairfield!! For shame!!!”

There was no mistaking what the wax candle, for such it was, was dolled-up to represent. The body was shapeless, but somebody had been to a lot of trouble to comb out the wick, stain and mould it. The hairdressing was that of Laura Cruft!

Costain, helmet and all, towered over Mrs. Fairfield like an avenging angel.

“What’s the meanin’ of all this ...?”

He almost said mumbo-jumbo, but remembering his Grandmother Quilliam, changed his mind. He wasn’t sure whether or not there wasn’t something in it!

“What’s the meanin’ of all this diabolicalness?”

Mrs. Fairfield was on her knees still and now clasped her hands and stretched them out to Costain. It was like a cheap melodrama, except that Costain’s posture made it look a bit like a harlequinade.

He knew the woman by reputation. Very decent and well-liked normally, she was a Celt and tended to go off at the deep-end when hard pressed. She must be hard-pressed now!

“Get up ... get up, this minute!” said Costain solemnly. He threw the candle in the heart of the fire and hastily gripped his thumbs in a simple form of the Cross again, as though the Devil might himself be still hovering around.

“What’s the meanin’ of all this? Don’t you know it’s ’ighly illegal to do those sort o’ things, you wicked woman, Mrs. Fairfield? I ought to arrest and take you in right away. I ought. Very serious offence is incantating and evil-eye. Severe punishments.”

He didn’t know a thing about it, but thought that now was the time to rub it in if he wanted a proper tale from the trembling woman he had caught in the very act.

She slowly rose to her feet, panting and rolling her eyes and not knowing where to look, like a child surprised in the midst of mischief.

“I didn’t do anythin’, Mr. Costain.”

“Oh yes, you did, Mrs. Fairfield, and well you know it. In the old days, where I come from, they used ter roll women caught doin’ wot you was just doin’ down Slieau Whuallian mountain in a barrel full o’ spikes.”

Mrs. Fairfield rolled her eyes again, twisted her fingers, and moaned aloud.

“Stop that noise! I’m willin’ to overlook it this once on account of your bein’ overwrought ... But on one condition.”

“Anythin’, anythin’, Mr. Costain.”

“You can tell me what it’s all about, then. Also I want a full tale about your Jessie and Johnny Hunter. Where is Jessie, by the way?”

“I sent ’er down the village shopping. Mooning indoors doesn’t do her any good. She’s two days’ holiday from work for VE days and spends her time moping about. Got on my nerves, so I sent her out.”

“And started all that diabolicalism ... I’m surprised at you, Mrs. Fairfield. A woman of your age, member o’ the church and widely respected locally. Can’t think how you could bring yourself to do such a thing.”

“If you’d all the troubles I have, you’d be at your wits’ end and try anything ... It’s more than flesh and blood can bear. And her such a good girl and happy till all this come along.”

“Suppose we begin at the beginning.”

“I don’t know that I ought to tell you ... Secrets between mother and daughter oughtn’t to be talked about to all and sundry.”

“You’d better, Mrs. Fairfield, you’d better. Else I’ll have to book you for witchcraft, and think of the disgrace that would be ...”

The overwrought woman burst into tears and howled dismally.

“Come on, now. Suppose we talk it over quietly ... What about a cup o’ tea, Mrs. Fairfield? Sort o’ lubricate us, eh?”

The woman was so relieved at the mention of tea that in next to no time they had a cup apiece in their hands, and Costain was blowing on his to cool it.

“Now what’s all this about, Mrs. F.?” said Costain, drying his moustache by raising his nether lip and drawing it tightly downwards over it.

Mrs. Fairfield put her cup firmly in her saucer and looked the constable fully in the face. She was a dark, good-looking, middle-aged woman, with high cheek bones, large, troubled, brown eyes and black hair shot with grey. Very well preserved, too, and it was rumoured that the local undertaker, Sam Stopford, himself a widower, was very sweet on her, but that, being fully centred on her two girls, she hadn't any time for him.

"It's my Jessie that's troublin' me. Always fond of Johnny Hunter she's been and as happy as a queen when his feelings turned in her direction. Then, when all seemed settled and happy, he began to cool off."

"Why, Mrs. Fairfield?"

"You know why as well as I do. So you needn't pretend to be so innocent. It's all over the village. Johnny was keen on Laura Cruft before he took up with Jessie. But young Free seemed to have cut him out."

"Yes?"

"Must I go on with this, Joe Costain? I'm only tellin' you what you know already."

"Tell me again, then."

"Well ... Johnny seems to have taken up with Jessie just to show Laura he didn't care. That's all. And my girl's breakin' her heart about it. He can't seem to get Laura out of his blood somehow. And now that Free's out of the running Jessie's that troubled. Can't sleep o' nights. She'll be going into a decline if something's not done."

"So you was doing somethin', Mrs. Fairfield. Enlistin' the help of the evil one to do it, too. Shame on you!"

"You needn't be so righteous about it, Joe Costain. You've never been a mother ... Never had children of your own; so you don't know what it feels like."

A stricken look came into Costain's eyes. This was rubbing it in with a vengeance! Still, he'd asked for it.

"Oh yes, I do know what it feels like. No use appealing to that side of my nature. I'm here in the course o' duty and my duty I'll do. Where was your Jessie on the night o' the crime between say nine thirty, pee hem, and ten?"

"Out with Johnny Hunter."

"At that time precisely?"

“Yes. And he wasn’t very nice to her. Came in and found her lying on the bed cryin’ her eyes out.”

“Too bad! What had he been doing?”

“Don’t ask me. She wouldn’t tell me a proper tale. All I know is, he’s not been nice to her of late. Why he keeps comin’ for her and why she puts up with it I don’t know.... There’s as good fish in the sea, I keep tellin’ her. *And* fish as worships the ground she treads on. So there!”

Mrs. Fairfield sniffed and proudly thrust her nose in the air.

“Such as ...?”

“Why will you persist in asking questions you already know, Joe Costain? Everybody knows that Mr. Shortt’s crazy about her, although I shouldn’t talk like that myself. He’s that friendly with me. Asking us both to come up and see his bungalow and take tea, and wantin’ to take my Jessie to the theatres and places in Melchester. He’s a nice man is Mr. Shortt and would make any girl a good husband, even if he is a writer.”

“I’m sure he would.”

“Yes ... Quiet and gentlemanly, too. You wouldn’t think he was that sort if you was to read his books. I got one or two from the local county library. My goodness! Talk about passion! Still waters run deep with him and no mistake. The last I read was about a man and a woman who hated him bein’ *entombed* in a cellar in the bombing of London. Before they was rescued she was like putty in ’is hands. Swept her off her feet ...”

“Yes. Yes. Pity he doesn’t use a bit of his technique in real life, eh?”

“What do you mean, Joe Costain? My Jessie’s a good girl, I’ll have you know.”

The band from the circus was in the village again. A few players blowing bleakly, followed by the elephant, a camel, a dancing bear and a moth-eaten lion in a cage on wheels. A motley procession of clowns, a woman riding on a barebacked white pony and a lorry with three acrobats throwing themselves about as it went along. Then a crowd of small children and women with babies in arms gaping with astonishment and eagerly accepting the handbills distributed by a man in a top hat, riding boots and a coat with an astrakhan collar. They passed by and peace descended again.

“I wasn’t saying anything about your girl’s morals. I merely meant that it sometimes doesn’t do to wear your heart on your sleeve like Shortt’s

doing. Johnny Hunter with his indifference seems to be succeeding better. It's often that way. Peculiar fact o' life."

Costain paused astonished at his own wisdom. Perhaps he'd have done better himself with Mrs. Costain if he hadn't been so soft-hearted. However, she'd been a lot better since she thought he'd got strangled, when all the time it was Will Butt.

The front door opened and Jessie entered. She was listless and flung her gloves and shopping basket casually on the table. She expressed no surprise at the sight of Costain. He was small fry compared with the problems exercising her mind at the moment.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Costain. Not often you call."

"Good afternoon, Jessie. You've just arrived in time. I'm wanting a word with you."

She was on the defensive right away. Her cheeks flushed and she drew in her breath, bracing herself for an ordeal.

Jessie was very like Mrs. Fairfield, only more delicately built. Her hair had an attractive wave in it and her fine, white teeth set off her dark, flawless complexion. Her figure was slim and supple and she had a daintiness and poise missing in her more excitable mother.

Johnny Hunter's a damn' fool and Shortt's too slow to carry cold dinners, thought Costain to himself.

"I was just wantin' to know where you were on the night Ronnie Free was killed, Jessie. Between half-past nine and ten, to be precise."

"With Johnny."

She said it firmly, as though she'd made up her mind properly.

"Sure? All the time?"

"All the time."

"Did he bring you home?"

"Nearly to the door."

"Why didn't he come in with you? He was comin'-in, wasn't he?"

Coming-in was an important stage in Ravelstonian wooings. The half-way house between dalliance and getting engaged officially.

"Of course he was comin'-in," said Mrs. Fairfield indignantly.

"Very well. Why didn't he come-in that night?"

Jessie's cheeks flamed and her lips trembled.

"He didn't want to that night."

“Why?”

“I won’t have her bullied, Joe Costain.”

“Do you mind leavin’ me to do this, Mrs. Fairfield? Else ...”

There was a deep threat in Costain’s voice. But he was too late. Jessie had rushed upstairs. Presumably to throw herself on the bed again and cry her eyes out. Costain looked more melancholy than ever. He couldn’t bear women crying.

“Look what you’ve done now, Joe Costain.”

“I can’t help it. I’ve got my duty. I want to be sure about that alibi.”

“You’re not thinking Johnny ...?”

“Of course not. Don’t be silly. But alibis has to be checked. Else, what good are they? I’m very put out, Mrs. Fairfield. Very put out indeed about this.”

“Well, she’s told you she was with him all the time. What more do you want? Her Bible oath or somethin’?”

“ No. A proper straightforward answer and not so much blushin’ and stammerin’ and playin’ about. You’d better have another talk with her yourself. Tell her I’ll be callin’ again and that next time I want a full account of where they was and their movements. And now I’ll be off. And see to it that there’s no more o’ this devil’s business agen’ Laura Cruft ... Or you’ll hear more from me.”

With that the bobby took a very dignified leave.

Once outside, however, Costain felt sick and tired of it all. Here the Scotland Yard man had given him a job to do and he’d only half done it! What Mr. Littlejohn would say, he didn’t know.

But when Costain met the Inspector, Littlejohn didn’t seem at all put about by Costain’s report. He appeared to be impressed and interested.

“I see, Costain. So you don’t feel convinced. Well, we’d better take up things from another angle. So far, we’ve not got a single bit of evidence to assist us, but there’s a vague sort of uncertainty in some directions that’s cheering. You know, I think a word or two with Shortt might do no harm. If he’s on the prowl after young Jessie, he might have something useful to tell us. These earnest lovers are very sensitive sometimes, especially when they’re of the artistic temperament.”

“Yes, sir. I see. Can I do anything more, sir?”

“Not at the moment, Costain. Get on with your routine duties and keep your eyes and ears open. We’ll be stumbling across something that will alter the whole course of events. I feel it in my bones that we’re getting warm, although in which direction I can’t for the life of me say.”

At the police station there was a message for Littlejohn to telephone back to Scotland Yard.

It was Cromwell with news about Paget, the thriller merchant. They’d drawn a blank at the London end.

Paget had been easy to pick up at the London terminus when he arrived from Ravelstone. He had been followed to Seven Dials, where he entered a public house, the *George Canning*. That seemed a bit fishy. Men like Paget didn’t frequent the Seven Dials direction for the benefit of their health. Perhaps he was in some racket or other.

But it all turned out quite simple and reasonable. Cromwell had had a drink and talked to the woman at the bar, who was also a sort of manageress. Paget had disappeared somewhere in the rear of the premises. Cromwell had just asked who he was as he passed by, he was sure he’d seen him before.

“Oh, that’s Mr. Paget, the owner of the place.”

Cromwell, with his throat full of beer had been so taken aback that he had almost choked and had to be vigorously slapped on the back by the buxom, heavy-handed woman in charge.

It seems that a certain Mr. Danks who owned the *George Canning* had been a Raid Warden with Paget during the bombing of London. Paget had conscientiously come down from the country three nights a week to do his bit in the stricken City. Good fellow! Well, one night he’d rescued Mr. Danks from a cellar in which the publican had been trapped, and saved his life. Danks, a bachelor with no dependants, had left Paget his prosperous little pub in his Will out of sheer gratitude and then got himself completely wiped out in a later raid. The place paid so well that Paget had kept it on and put in a manageress.

So that was that. The author was supplementing his perhaps meagre earnings from the prosperous little “public” at Seven Dials.

“Well, well,” said Littlejohn. “Wonders never cease. The more you do our job, the more surprises you get!”

Paget was a decent fellow after all. Not a philanderer making secret trips to his lady in London. Suppose he loved his wife and had heard about young Free and his affair with her, and being a bit of a criminologist, had tried to concoct a perfect crime.

“Well, I’ve another job for you now, Cromwell. You might go down to Dintling in Worcestershire, and see what information you can gather about a man called Spry, David Spry. Left Dintling about fifteen years ago. It’s a bit of a trip. Not far from Tewkesbury, I believe. Do your best, old chap ...”

So far, every trail had petered out. All the same, new ones kept opening. One of them would surely bring results at the end.

Mrs. Costain appeared with some more tea and scones and this time she was much more pleasant about matters.

“Smoke if you like,” she said.

Costain’s mouth fell open. He could hardly believe his ears! Mrs. Costain gave him a proud, possessive smile as she left the room.

There had been a lot of talk around the village about the well-known detective from London. Somebody had even retailed a few of his best cases and told how he had brought unexpected criminals to book. And Joe Costain, collaborating like mad, had come in for a large measure of reflected glory. Mrs. Costain was being treated with greater respect, even deference, in certain quarters. There was a suggestion that at the next general meeting she would be put on the committee of the Women’s Institute.

Joe wasn’t such a dud, after all. Mrs. Costain was proud of him!



## 17.

### A WRITER OF ROMANCES

*“Hope is itself a species of happiness, and, perhaps, the chief happiness which this world affords.”*

SAMUEL JOHNSON

LITTLEJOHN got a bit of a surprise when he met George Shortt. If he expected the “Maude Temple” of romantic fiction to be an effeminate, neurotic slip of a fellow, he was mistaken. Shortt was six feet high, forty or a little more, well built and with a sun-tanned face. His fair hair was receding from a high forehead and his blue eyes were troubled and innocent. He wondered what the police wanted with him.

An elderly housekeeper showed Littlejohn into a room furnished expensively. Somehow, you didn’t expect Shortt to be cared for by a pretty young maid. He looked too prim. He was carefully dressed and had fussy, fastidious ways with his hands and feet.

Over the fireplace was a good oil painting of an elderly, grey-haired lady. Shortt was a bachelor. The kind who remains under his mother’s influence until late in life. A sort of Sir Galahad, who, when the influence is removed by death, falls for a girl and right away places her on a pedestal.

You couldn’t call Shortt girlish by any stretch of imagination, but both his literary work and his home bore striking evidence of feminine domination.

When Littlejohn asked him about Jessie Fairfield, Shortt blushed and looked awkward. Then he pulled himself together with a great effort.

“You’re a friend of Miss Fairfield’s, sir?” asked Littlejohn blandly. Better put it mildly, he thought.

That seemed to please Shortt.

"Yes," he replied eagerly as though the admission were somehow furthering his cause.

"You know, then, that she's practically engaged to Johnny Hunter?"

Shortt's face fell this time.

"I've heard something about it, but placed no importance on it. There's so much gossip goes on in this place. And nowadays engagements seem only to be made to be broken."

Hope springs eternal, thought the Inspector. Shortt couldn't face the fact, obviously, so tried to pass it off lightly.

"Now, sir. I'm anxious to know where Miss Fairfield was between 9-30 and ten o'clock on the night young Free was killed. Where were you at that time, by the way?"

The question was so unexpected that Shortt took it like a blow in the face. He stepped back a pace and then turned his back on Littlejohn and looked through the open french window across the lawn.

The view was a beautiful one. Shortt's bungalow was shielded from the road by a thick hedge. Between that and the house, a lawn like a green carpet, flanked by well-kept flower beds. These were bright with late blooms in spite of the early frosts.

Behind there were fruit trees and then the land fell away to a deep glen with a thin stream rattling over stones at the bottom of it.

Trees in their autumn glory everywhere. In a dovecote on the lawn two doves were sitting. They must have been very old, or their love had grown faint and fretful, for they never moved. Only the flicker of their eyes betrayed that they were alive.

Shortt had made money out of fiction and knew how to get the most for it.

The house was the same. Plenty of good furniture, good books, pictures of no common type, comfort and well-being everywhere. No wonder Mrs. Fairfield favoured Shortt's suit.

Littlejohn followed the novelist to the window.

"Lovely place," he said with appreciation.

"Yes, isn't it?"

There was a lovelorn sigh about the reply. Littlejohn smiled.

"You haven't answered the question yet, sir."

“What does it matter to you? I’m not suspected, am I? Hardly knew young Free.”

“Leave me to judge its importance, sir. Where were you?”

“I was out ... Walking in the village.”

“Alone?”

“Yes.”

Littlejohn looked him in the eyes. Shortt quailed. The Inspector knew he wasn’t getting a full tale. Why?

“Which way did you go? Please be precise. We know the movements of quite a lot of people and it’s as well to be careful.”

“I went down to the centre of the village, posted a letter to my publishers and then strolled back.”

“So you passed the scene of the crime?”

“Come to think of it, I did.”

Come to think of it! Littlejohn was sure the fact had given Shortt many a qualm. There was no question at all of coming to think of it.

“Did you see anything or anybody?”

“No.”

“Quite sure?”

“Certainly. Why?”

“You didn’t by any chance meet Miss Fairfield on the road, sir?”

The shot landed home. Shortt almost reeled. He was a queer sort. Most unimaginative looking, yet hiding beneath a harmless enough exterior one of the best minds for sensational fiction in the literary world.

“Who? Me? Meet Miss Fairfield?” Littlejohn glowed with inner satisfaction. Shortt’s way of saying Who? Me? showed he was trying to gain time.

“Certainly not! I was alone all the time.”

“Think again, sir. Did you meet Miss Fairfield about the time stated? It’s important. If you didn’t, she’s likely to have some trouble.”

The threat to his darling roused Shortt at once. He flushed scarlet. Like a hen defending her brood.

“What’s all this? Because if ...”

“I’ve reason to believe that Miss Fairfield was roaming alone near the scene of the crime at the time it was committed.”

Littlejohn hadn’t reason at all. It was just a long shot and it got home.

“Why ... Jessie ... er ... Miss Fairfield hadn’t anything to do with it! If you’re insinuating ... By God!”

“I’m insinuating nothing. I want to know the movements of anyone alone in the village at the time of the crime. If you saw Miss Fairfield you’d better tell me, sir, for her sake.”

“All right then. I did see her.”

“And she asked you to say you hadn’t. Is that it?”

“What the hell’s that got to do with you?”

A sufficient answer. Littlejohn didn’t press the matter.

“Where did you meet her?”

“At the bottom of Gallows Hill, just where it turns into the village street.”

“What was she doing?”

“Going home, of course.”

“So Hunter had sent her packing, or else left her to her own devices?”

“I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about. All I know is I saw her home.”

“H’m. Was she distressed?”

“How should I know? It was quite dark.”

“How did you recognise her, then?”

Shortt blushed again and ran his finger around the front of his collar.

“I called good-night and she answered.”

“So you walked home with her. Thanks very much, sir. That’s very useful. What time would that be, could you say?”

“Around nine thirty. The clock hadn’t struck half a minute before. Is that all, because ...”

“Yes. That’s all, sir. Many thanks.”

Littlejohn got a cold reception at the old school house when he called there. Mrs. Fairfield and her daughter were afraid this time. They weren’t dealing with Costain, and were scared.

“Why did you say you were with young Hunter at the time of the crime the other night, Miss Fairfield?”

Littlejohn went into the attack right away.

Jessie Fairfield had a teacup and saucer in her hand. The cup rattled and she almost let it fall. The mother was quick to the defence.

“Why can’t you leave her alone? She’s had enough trouble as it is.”

“And is likely to have some more if she doesn’t tell us the truth. Now, Miss Fairfield, why did you tell us you were with Hunter all the time, when you know Mr. Shortt met you and saw you home about half past nine? I know you asked him not to say he’d seen you.”

The pretty girl’s mouth fell open and her cheeks turned white.

“He promised ...”

“I know. I had to force it out of him and even then only because he thought you’d suffer if he didn’t tell me.”

No use spoiling Shortt’s chances with the girl. He was having enough heavy weather as it was!

“I know Hunter asked you to say you’d been with him all the time. When did he ask you to say that? The morning after the murder?”

Jessie Fairfield tried to speak and then fell in a dead faint.

“Now look what you’ve done ... You great bullies, you police. Why can’t you ...?”

“Get some water and smelling salts and don’t talk so much, Mrs. Fairfield.”

The girl was not long in recovering.

“Don’t tell Johnny I told you.”

She was hardly conscious before she was pleading for the man who didn’t care a rap for her and had only used her to cover his own purposes.

There was no time to waste and Littlejohn left Mrs. Fairfield looking after her daughter. He found Costain putting a ragged queue of women in order in front of the grocer’s shop. They didn’t know what they were queueing for, but somebody had started it and the epidemic had spread.

“Hunter’s been in and about the village for about twelve years or so. A bit of a queer lad. Doesn’t seem to ’ave any kith or kin,” replied Costain in answer to the Inspector’s enquiry.

“How did he land here? Someone adopt him? Must have been quite a youngster when he first arrived.”

“Yes. About twelve I’d say when he came. Funny business. Somebody wanted him to get educated at Melchester School. Quite a good school. Public school, you know, sir.”

“Well?”

“He was a day boy, boarding in the village. Queer arrangement. Lodged with Mrs. Naysmith, a widow woman, till she died and then went in rooms

with Mrs. Shore, where he still is.”

“Anything known of his parents?”

“Not a thing, sir. I wouldn’t be surprised if he wasn’t a sort o’ nacheral son of one of the local gentry. There’s a lot o’ people hereabouts thinks the same. But the secret’s bin well kept. Such things always are where the nobbs are concerned, aren’t they, sir?”

“I daresay they are. Where can we find Hunter now, Costain?”

“Better let’s try Mrs. Shore’s first. She’ll probably know, if he’s not in.”

Mrs. Shore was an elderly, busy woman with a chronic passion for tidiness. She was wiry and harassed and notorious for her avarice. She thought the world of Hunter and local gossips said she would leave him a nice little pile when she died.

The police officers found her polishing and cleaning the living room of her cottage, with her petticoats tucked up and a cloth around her hair. She was famous for quarrelling and wrangling with neighbours or anyone else she could lay her tongue to, so Costain pushed Littlejohn into the room first.

“What do you two want? And don’t come tramping all over my clean rooms in your great boots.”

Littlejohn asked if Hunter was in.

“No. Anybody can see I’m alone.”

“Can you tell us where he’s gone? Melchester?”

“How should I know? I’m not his wet-nurse. Old enough to look after himself. And don’t you take up my time. I’ve some jam on and somebody’s for it if I spoil it.”

Littlejohn pursued his course with patience.

“Have you any *idea* where he is, Mrs. Shore?”

The woman was on her knees. She squatted back on her heels, put her hands on her hips and looked Littlejohn in the face.

“Some people is persistent ... I think he’s gone to see how David Spry’s gettin’ on. Will that satisfy you? I’ve only told you to get rid of you, so you’d better be off. Can’t keep me mind on the jam, me housework and the questions of interferin’ policemen. As if I hadn’t enough to do.”

Littlejohn and Costain were already down the garden path.

On the way to Apple Tree farm they saw Jessie Fairfield coming towards them.

“She’s soon out and about,” said Costain, puffing from his hurrying.

The girl, seeing them, cut into a lane behind the houses in the main street and vanished.

“What’s she up to?”

“Looks as if she’s been hunting for Hunter to warn him that we have broken his alibi. Let’s hurry.”

Mrs. Spry answered the door. She was as white as a sheet. Laura was in the dark passage leading indoors.

“Is Johnny Hunter here, Mrs. Spry?”

The woman hesitated.

“No ...”

Laura remained in the background quiet and still, waiting for developments.

“Has he been here?”

“Er ...”

“He has. Please stand aside.”

Followed by Costain, who looked sheepish about the whole business, Littlejohn entered the place. Laura faced them in the hall.

“He’s not here. Don’t you believe my mother?”

Littlejohn thought he detected a faint smile of triumph. She had no colour in her cheeks and there were small beads of sweat on her upper lip. Something or someone had been imposing a strain on the two women.

There was nobody in the downstairs rooms. Upstairs, all was quiet. Littlejohn entered Spry’s bedroom. The grim, bewhiskered face of the late Cruft glared from its frame at him with faded eyes.

The bed was empty.

Mrs. Spry had followed close on Littlejohn’s heels.

“Where’s your husband?”

“I don’t know.”

This time the surprise was genuine. She looked frankly bewildered.

The casement was open and Spry had knotted two sheets from his bed and let himself out that way.

“Have you a car, Mrs. Spry?”

“Yes. In a garage by the cowshed there.”

“Has Miss Fairfield been here?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“She was after Johnny Hunter.”

“And found him here?”

“Yes. He’d come enquiring after Mr. Spry.”

“What did she say to him?”

“I don’t know. They were alone in the hall for a minute or two.”

“I see. What did Hunter say to your husband whilst he was here.”

“That I don’t know either. I left them alone together in the bedroom.”

“Were they friends?”

“Oh yes. Got on very well. Johnny used to come here after Laura at one time. Father liked him and did all he could to keep them together. Nothing would have made him happier than to see them married.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know, except they took a fancy to one another.”

“The car’s gone, sir,” gasped Costain, returning from inspecting the garage.

“Then they’ve bolted for some reason.”

“Had I better ...?”

“No, Costain. You stay here and keep a close eye on things. Watch the buildings and house. I’m off to telephone Melchester and get the roads watched. I’ll be back.”

Littlejohn hurried away and gave the necessary instructions, passing on a description of the two missing men and the car. Then followed two barren hours until the Inspector was called to the police-station telephone again.

This time it was Cromwell speaking from Tewkesbury police station.

As usual, that excellent officer had a long tale to tell and it was full of surprises.



## 18.

### THE PESTLE AND MORTAR

*“The country very fine ... I did drink four pints.”*

SAMUEL PEPYS

EVER since the railway reached Tewkesbury there had been one or another Lovitt plying a vehicle between there and Dintling. Seth Lovitt had started it with a farm lorry with ordinary kitchen chairs screwed on it to accommodate venturesome passengers. And now his great, great grandson, Simon, ran a sumptuous limousine, bought on the hire purchase and nearly paid for.

Simon had a fearful squint which made you wonder how he managed to keep to the left with his eye continually roving to the right, and no top teeth in front, which gave him the look of a fanged beast of prey prepared to stop his vehicle in a quiet part, cut your throat and make off with all your possessions.

Cromwell was directed to the Lovitt tumbril, which was standing proudly in the station-yard, with Simon, duster in hand, breathing on the shining bonnet and polishing off all the blemishes which weren't there.

Simon fancied himself a bit, in spite of his lack of natural graces. He rushed to the door of the car, opened it with a flourish and bowed Cromwell in. The sergeant eyed Simon apprehensively. Simon eyed Cromwell, too, but Cromwell couldn't be expected to know that, for the squint eyes were looking in all directions as though furiously seeking fares.

Two more passengers arrived. An old man in his Sunday best who had been to a funeral and told Simon all about the burying and the meal that followed it before he got in. The other was a fat woman with a shopping

basket who had missed the only market 'bus home and wrangled about the price with Simon for a long time before deciding to patronise him. She tried to beat him down to the 'bus fare level, claiming to have nursed Simon's sister through the measles once, by way of argument, which Simon rebutted by explaining that the relative in question had been dead for twelve years come Valentine's Day and didn't enter into it.

When the woman sat down beside Cromwell in the back seat, the whole contrivance developed a list, so that Cromwell was pleased to offer his place to the gaffer in exchange for the bucket seat which had been let down to accommodate the old 'un. The latter thereupon leaned heavily on the fat woman whose pillowy folds seemed to add great comfort to his journey.

"Just been to a funeral," began the old fellow, addressing Cromwell, perhaps by way of a quid pro quo for the seat. "Old friend o' mine. Eighty five he was ... Now how old 'ud you think I was?"

"Eighty five," said Cromwell.

"Now 'ow did you know that?"

The gaffer was peeved. It was the custom in Dintling to tell him he didn't look a day older than sixty. And yet, here was a total stranger ... It bothered the old man.

"I seen 'em all off. Twelve of us went to village school together and all started work before ten years old. This one we buried to-day was the last of 'em. Now there's only me left ... Seen 'em all off ..."

So it went on and on all the way to Dintling. Cromwell tried yawning very obviously to show he wasn't interested, but this only stimulated the old man to greater garrulity, just like a comedian who finds he isn't going down with the audience and begins to strain every nerve to give them all he's got for the sake of applause at the curtain.

The gaffer retailed all the history of Dintling and his contemporaries fifty or more years ago. Cromwell thought that somewhere in the narrative the name Spry might crop up and give him an opening for getting the information he was after, but it was no good.

At length they cruised triumphantly into Dintling.

They had passed a mansion on the outskirts. Almost like a French chateau and Dintling seemed like a feudal appendage. A few rows of whitewashed cottages clustered around a long, narrow village green; a general stores; a pub; a smithy; a butcher's shop. Little more besides. As the

taxi passed wayfarers within a radius of two miles of Dintling hands were waved and when they sailed into the centre, groups of people in front of the inn and the two shops almost raised a cheer. Especially when they saw the old man. A regular royal procession.

“Enjoyed the ride, Mr. Spry?” said Simon Lovitt, baring his gums cheerfully.

Spry!

Cromwell jumped out of his seat.

The old man was turning round and round like a dog going to bed finding the easiest way to manoeuvre his ancient bones out of the taxi.

“Let me give you a hand, sir,” briskly offered Cromwell.

But a dozen willing hands were already stretched out for that purpose. A fat woman in a beret and knitted jumper suit detached herself from the group, buried her face in the old ’un’s frothy beard and then patted his shoulder affectionately.

“Had a good trip, dad?”

The huge remaining passenger eased herself laboriously from the cab, almost smothering Cromwell in the effort, and disappeared nearly unnoticed in the mob.

“Yes, I done fine. We buried ’un proper. Meat tea there was, too.”

Old man Spry was well launched into his tale, greatly to the relish of the listeners. One of them took his little oblong rush basket of belongings and another the large bunch of garden blooms with which they had evidently sent him off at the other end. Cromwell couldn’t get near him.

“Seven-and-sixpence, sir, please, and I hope you’re satisfied.”

Simon smiled toothlessly and extended a large, grubby palm for his fare. Cromwell gave him ten shillings.

“Have a drink with the change.”

“Much obliged I’m sure, mister.”

“The old gentleman seems very welcome.”

“Oh, ah. All the village be proper relieved to see him back. Too old to travel, he is, but go he would. All the way to Worcester! We all bin very anxious about ’im goin’ so far afield at ’is age. Proper rambler, he is. One day he’ll overdo it and they’ll bring ’im ’ome feet first. Yew mark my words.”

“Did I hear you call him Mr. Spry?”

“Aye, you did. Gabriel Spry.”

“I knew a Spry once. I think he came from these parts.”

“Oh, ah. What might his first name ’a been?”

“David. Any relation of the old man’s?”

“David, did you say! Better ask Ole Gabriel if he’s a relation. He’ll have a stroke!”

“Why?”

“He ain’t no relation. Lots o’ that name in these parts. But Gabriel’s proper proud o’ the family name and if the David you mean’s the one I’m thinkin’ on, he ain’t done the family much credit, relation or no relation.”

“He always seemed a decent fellow to me.”

“Oh, he did, did he? Well, here he wasn’t thought much a pound. Dark horse and full o’ craftiness. So unpopular, he found it best to leave for other parts. Got a girl in trouble and wouldn’t do the right thing by her. That’s your Mr. David Spry.”

Simon glared at Cromwell as much as his squint eyes would allow. It was a fearful contortion and made the sergeant feel like taking to his heels. But he stuck to his guns.

“Is the girl still alive?”

“Nope. Died when the babby was born.”

“What happened to the child, then?”

“Inquisitive, ain’t you, mister? Well, if you must know, Spry’s maiden aunt adopted him. Later sent ’im away to school and we ain’t heard of ’im since.”

“Is the aunt still here?”

Lovitt sighed heavily, and gave Cromwell a weary look.

“Yes. Lives in the first cottage across the green there. Fine woman, Miss Amelia Spry is, although a secret sort and keeps a bit to herself. None the worse for that, though. Well, I must be off. Takin’ a party to the theeayter in Tewkesbury to-night and got a lot to do before that.”

The deputation of welcome having safely established the aged traveller in his own cottage, broke up and some of them retired to the inn. The latter had at one time been an apothecary’s house and bore the queer title of *The Pestle and Mortar*.

At first the company thought Cromwell a traveller for religious literature and gave him a wide berth, but when he ordered a pint of best

Tewkesbury mild they changed their minds and became a bit more sociable. He had to stand drinks round, however, to thaw the ice properly. This Cromwell did, lovingly fingering the bit of paper in his jacket pocket which contained his out-of-pockets for the trip and whose figures would, in course of time, be transferred to an official expenses sheet.

Cromwell adopted with the company at *The Pestle and Mortar* the same tactics he had used with Simon Lovitt. He led the conversation with bland innocence from Old Gabriel Spry to David of the same surname. The regulars did not show the reticence of Simon, probably because of the lubricant administered by the stranger.

One fellow with a hacking cough was particularly talkative. He was small, sandy moustached, and had a face set in bileous folds. He coughed as he talked. Sometimes speech won; sometimes the cough. In the latter event, he stopped and gasped for air like a fish on dry land. His name was Wigglesworth and he was the village baker. He asked Cromwell to excuse his affliction, due to flour getting in his “chubes.”

“Years since I saw Davie Spry,” said the baker. “One ’ud think he’d come to see his aunt now and agen, her havin’ all that money and precious few to leave it to.”

The “chubes” began to bother him and he had to pause.

“But he seems scared of showin’ his face here. Though local folk have forgiven and forgotten his dark past. Compared with some of the goings-on in the camps hereabouts, David Spry was an angel.”

The assembly solemnly concurred and having drunk-up to a man, looked sadly at their empty pots. Cromwell thought it best to order more drinks round.

That warmed them up. They went into David Spry and his affairs like billy-o.

The public enquiry took nearly an hour, during which time they stood one another drinks until they lost count of whose turn it was next and Cromwell forgot how much his expenses sheet owed him for his share.

By dividing Mr. Wigglesworth’s articulation from his cough and translating the strange speech of a very loquacious man with a cleft palate, Cromwell sifted enough information to be going on with.

David Spry had been, in his young days, engaged to a girl in the village with whom he was very much in love. Another girl of the place had also

been mad for him and chased him everywhere. Eventually it came out that the latter one was going to have a child and Spry was the father. This piece of information caused a long discussion about women and their ways, and Cromwell had his work cut out to steer the conversation back into channels which would be useful to him.

Spry didn't marry the wronged one. He didn't want her. He still loved his fiancée, who turned him down, quite naturally, and told him to make an honest woman of the other. Instead, Spry left the village.

When the child was born, Spry's aunt interested herself in him and his mother, who died shortly after the event. Miss Spry adopted the boy, who eventually left Dintling to go to school and college.

"Where did he go to, do you know?" asked Cromwell.

The man with the cleft palate couldn't get his tongue round the name of the place, but the one with the bad cough managed to get it out between paroxysms.

"Melchester, I think it was."

Cromwell's lips grew pursed in a noiseless whistle.

"What was his name?"

"His mother was Clara Hunter. They called him John."

"John Hunter, eh?"

"Yes."

"David Spry's son?"

"Yes, we said so, didn't we? Wrong side o' the blanket, of course."

"Does he ever visit his aunt?"

"Has been known to."

"Does he know his father?"

"Not that we'd know. Jim Pearson, Miss Spry's gardener, told me only the other week the old girl's as close as a clam about the affair. She thinks a lot about David, still. And from what we hear, he's married and done well for himself. Not likely she'd spoil it all for him by lettin' it be known there was a scandal."

It was the landlord who had taken up the tale. A huge fellow with an enormous paunch which hung between his knees when he sat down. He liked a good gossip and once started occupied the floor until he was exhausted.

It was a lovely evening outside. Warm and mellow and thirst provoking. Habituals began to drift in and the company broke up, one and another joining fresh groups of friends to discuss the day's events. They hadn't got over the spring frosts which had destroyed so much blossom and nearly ruined the local fruit growers. Sooner or later, the topic entered every conversation. One man, half drunk, was trying to put the blame on the government, and another, also half seas over, blamed the rockets and other high explosives.

Cromwell thought it time to telephone Littlejohn and tell him his news. There was a red kiosk opposite the inn door and he was just making for it when there was a mild commotion.

The man with the impediment in his voice had been watching an old car pass the window and by noises and gestures indicated that something unusual was going on. The victim of the cough seemed to understand his pal's every word and gesture.

"That car's stopped at Miss Spry's house along the green there, and that looks like young John Hunter gettin' out in a hurry," he managed to get out before his "chubes" revolted and set him quaking again.

Cromwell thought it high time to get in touch with his chief.

He looked grim when he emerged from the red telephone box.

The old car was still standing in front of Miss Spry's villa when Cromwell arrived there.

It looked like being awkward, for Cromwell had no warrant for Hunter's arrest and, as yet, the case wasn't cut and dried at Ravelstone. Littlejohn merely wanted Hunter for further questioning.

Cromwell's problem was quickly solved, however. As he approached the front door, it was thrown open and young Hunter and his aunt appeared. The old lady was as straight as a ramrod, stern, dark and with a keen eye which fixed itself on Cromwell.

"Are you from the police?" she said without more ado.

"Yes, madam."

"Then your arrival is timely. John has been telling me you want him in connection with a murder at Ravelstone."

"That is so."

"Don't interrupt. He assures me he did not commit the crime, and I believe him. I have advised him to return and face the police and clear

himself. You can accompany him there.”

There seemed no gainsaying the imperious old lady. It was like a royal command. So Hunter turned the car round and he and Cromwell set off back to Ravelstone.



## 19.

### WHAT HAPPENED TO SPRY?

*“Fiendish faces, with the extinguished taper, will come and look at me.”*

CHARLES LAMB

“It’s no use, Mrs. Spry. You’ve got to tell me where your husband is.”

Littlejohn had returned from his telephoning with Cromwell and was sitting in the kitchen of Apple Tree Farm. He had been there almost an hour, saying little, smoking heavily and waiting imperturbably for the arrival of his assistant with Johnny Hunter.

Outside all was still. The last light of evening was fading and silhouetted against the red remnant of sunset, the tall, thin form of Costain, guarding the outbuildings and rick-yard. He had been there four hours, patience made alive.

Laura Cruft and her mother were sitting one on each side of the fireplace. They had little to say. There wasn’t much to talk about.

Mrs. Spry had lost all her energy. Eyes lifeless, cheeks as pale as death, she was waiting for the return of the runaway Hunter in fear and trembling. Laura looked strangely excited and now and then went to the window to watch the road, as though eager for the sight of her one-time lover.

“I tell you I don’t know where my husband is, Inspector. Why keep asking me? I thought he’d gone with Hunter.”

“Why should he go with Hunter?”

“I don’t know, except that they may have made it up together when they were talking just before they both disappeared.”

A car drew up outside and there was a knock at the door. Eagerly Laura ran to answer it, but returned with a long face. It was only Superintendent

Glaisher, calling, as requested, to assist. He took off his hat, greeted the party and, sitting in a chair before the fire, looked for some ledge or projection on which to rest his large feet. Eventually he brought them down on the hob to the right of the fire, almost dislodging a small casserole standing there keeping warm its contents.

Littlejohn's eye fell on the brown dish.

"Don't let me keep you from your meal," he said.

"We had it before you came."

"Well, don't let me prevent you giving Mr. Spry his."

It fell like a bombshell!

Mrs. Spry started and her pale face turned ashen.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean what I say. You've hidden your husband about the place somewhere. The sooner you bring him out the better. He can't get away. Superintendent Glaisher has just posted half a dozen men round the farm. Nobody can come or go without permission."

Mrs. Spry's lips tightened, but she said nothing.

They stayed there and continued twiddling their thumbs until at length Hunter and Cromwell arrived.

The newcomers blinked as they entered the well-lit room.

Laura rose and her feet seemed hardly to touch the floor as she sped to the door and straight into Hunter's arms.

"Oh, Johnny!"

"Laura, my dear, my dear."

They made no effort to conceal their feelings and then turned defiantly on Littlejohn as though challenging him to do his damndest. "Well, Hunter?" said Littlejohn.

The Inspector was very grim and his eyes had lost the laughter which was usually lurking somewhere there.

"Well? What do you want with me? I didn't kill Free and you can't prove I did."

Glaisher seized the poker, moved a log of wood which seemed to be causing him some inconvenience and then readjusted his legs and feet on the hob with a sigh of content.

"Where were you when the crime was committed, Hunter?"

“How many more times have I to tell you ...? I was with Jessie Fairfield in Lovers’ Lane.”

“Not a very constant sort of lover, are you? Can’t you make up your mind which of the girls you want?”

“No business of yours.”

“Very much my business. You left Miss Fairfield some time before Free was murdered. She came home alone and met another escort just as she got to the village centre. Now, come along. I want the truth. I haven’t all night to waste.”

“I’ve nothing to say.”

“Then *I’ll* tell you. You’ve always been in love with Miss Cruft here, but you had a tiff or something and took up with another of the village girls for spite. And you treated her damned badly.”

“I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about.”

“Oh yes, you do. And Free had been hanging around Miss Cruft very much of late, and she, in pique or despair, promised to marry him.”

“I didn’t.”

“No, Miss Cruft, perhaps you didn’t intend to go through with it if Johnny was shaken sufficiently to come back to you. But meanwhile something tragic happened.”

“Johnny didn’t do it!”

“Nobody’s saying he did, Miss Cruft. As a matter of fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if when he left Miss Fairfield on that fatal night, he hadn’t made up his mind to come straight here and ask you to forgive and forget ... Am I right, Hunter?”

“Yes ... Laura knows that’s true. I told her before I cleared out to Tewkesbury. We still loved each other and couldn’t go on as we were. But when I got down here, I found her and Free sweethearting in the garden. At first I felt like interfering and beating up the little swine.... Then I decided to take a walk round, let him get out of the way, and then see Laura. When I got back, they were carrying Free’s body down the road. He’d been killed. I cleared off. I suddenly realised that if it were known that I was anywhere about at the time, I’d be for it. Everybody knew Free and I were daggers drawn about Laura.”

“So you went off and asked Miss Fairfield to give you an alibi.”

“Yes. God help me, I did. It was a lousy trick, but the best I could think of at the time.”

“I see. How long have you known Mr. Spry was your father?”

It ought to have dropped like a bombshell, but it didn’t. Only Mrs. Spry looked terrified, as though sensing the trend of the conversation.

“What are you talking about?”

“Come, come, Sergeant Cromwell has learned all about you and passed on the news by telephone.”

Cromwell, who had been quietly sitting by the door, smoking and listening to the conversation, grunted and resumed his puffing at a pipe exactly like Littlejohn’s own. He had become an enthusiastic pipe addict and even went to the extent of copying Littlejohn in choice of tobacco.

“Since the night after Free was buried, if you must know. My father seemed overwrought, told me who I was and that he wanted me to marry Laura now Free was out of the way. He must have seen how things were between the two of us and tried to do the best he could.”

“No, I’m afraid there was more than that to it.”

Mrs. Spry uttered a shrill wail, buried her face in her hands and sobbed convulsively.

“It’s no use, Mrs. Spry,” said Littlejohn. “Superintendent Glaisher here has been all afternoon at the bank and has discovered that between you, you and Mr. Spry have disposed of the bulk of Laura’s fortune.”

Glaisher nodded and continued meditating on the ends of his large boots.

Mrs. Spry sobbed more than ever.

“We didn’t ... I ... I ...”

“Yes, you did. Old Fothergill and his partners aren’t so bright as they should be. You’ve been forging Fothergill’s signature on cheques on the trust account over the past four years. They were put before him this afternoon and he repudiates the signatures. What have you done with the money?”

“We sunk it in the farm ... It wasn’t paying. We intended to put it all right. But somehow ...”

Laura was at her mother’s side, trying to comfort her.

“It’s all right. Johnny and I won’t mind. Will we Johnny?”

“Of course not.”

“That’s what Mr. and Mrs. Spry hoped, Hunter. They knew that if Laura married Free, it wouldn’t come so easy. In fact, he might have been in a mood for landing them both in gaol.”

“But I wouldn’t have allowed that!”

“That’s as maybe, Miss Cruft, but they couldn’t risk it. Johnny was Spry’s son. It would have been easier with him when the whole sorry business came out, but with an outsider, things might have turned very nasty.”

Laura was still patting her mother’s shoulder gently.

“We won’t go on with it ... It’ll be all right, mother.”

Littlejohn turned to her.

“That’s nothing to do with me, Miss Cruft. I’m after Free’s murderer. Where is Mr. Spry?”

“I tell you I don’t know.”

The Inspector walked to the door.

“You there, Costain?”

“Yessir.”

“Anything doing?”

“Not a thing.”

“Very well. Carry on.”

“Spry was out in the yard when he overheard Free propose to Laura and realised when she accepted him that the game was up. In desperation, he strangled Free.”

“It’s not true,” moaned Mrs. Spry. “He wouldn’t have done such a thing. He’s not a bad man.”

“All the same, he’s going to have a job keeping the noose from his neck this time.”

“You’ve not got him yet.”

It was Hunter who spoke. He snarled it and leered in triumph at Littlejohn.

“We soon will, though. He’s hidden somewhere hereabouts and can’t get away.”

Suddenly there were confused shouts outside. From the rickyard could be heard the tramping of heavy boots and voices crying to each other. Then a dull red glow, which expanded like a huge firework into a mass of flames.

“The rickyard’s on fire!”

Mrs. Spry was on her feet and out of doors before anyone realised what she was doing. The police officers were quickly on her heels and Hunter panted along with them.

The whole place was lit up by the flames. In the village confused shouts told that the blaze had been spotted and you could hear the firemen clanking around with their equipment in the N.F.S. sub-station. It took them a long time to get under way. They had been holding a hot-pot supper at *The Bird in Hand* and weren't in the best of form. The fire chief could be heard swearing at them and urging them on.

Before Littlejohn and Glaisher reached the spot the fox had broken cover. There was a commotion in a partly cut haystack and Spry emerged, unshaven, haggard and almost mad with panic.

"Fire!" he panted. "Fire!"

Glaisher turned on the headlamps of his car and illuminated the scene. Costain threw a few buckets of water over the heap of hay he had ignited and the fire was over.

"I thought we'd smoke you out when I gave Costain the signal," said Littlejohn.

"You might have set the whole place alight, you silly devils," growled Hunter.

"I gave you a chance to tell us where he was. The bonfire department was in the able hands of Costain. There was no risk."

They hustled Spry indoors and the kitchen again became the centre of the stage.

"I didn't do it," whined Spry, quite at the end of his tether.

"Who did, then?"

"I don't know, but I didn't."

"Oh yes, you do know. It was your precious son, Hunter, and you thought if you hid and pretended you'd bolted you'd draw us off the scent until he could get far enough away. But you forgot one thing."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I'll tell you, then. You wanted your son to marry Laura, sure enough. You'd been robbing her of trust moneys and hoped if she didn't marry a stranger you'd be able to put things right. But *you* hadn't the guts to kill anybody. You couldn't even hang yourself properly when things got too much for you. It needed a more resolute man for the job, and Hunter was

the man. He was mad about Laura ... I think his tale was true about leaving Jessie Fairfield and coming to make it up with Miss Cruft, but he chanced upon her just as she was in Free's arms and talking marriage arrangements. That did it.... He killed Free."

"All damned nonsense and you can't prove a word of it," yelled Hunter, full of confidence in himself.

"You prefer to let your own father stand trial, eh?"

"You've got nothing on him."

"Quite right. We know it was you who did it."

"You don't know a thing about anything as far as I can see. You're just trying to pin it on somebody or other to save your face."

"You admit you left Miss Fairfield some time before the crime?"

"I said so, didn't I? I said Free was alive and talking to Laura when I passed this place. I stick to what I said."

"You didn't happen to pass Costain, did you?"

Hunter's eyes opened wide. There was a look of alarm in them.

"You may well look upset, Hunter. If you were here before Costain, and you were if your tale's correct, how did you know about the poaching episode? I'll tell you. You attacked Butt and got the information from the report he was carrying. You thought that document contained something incriminating you and you just had to have it ... Instead, you found a tale about some stolen game. You hadn't the sense to keep your mouth shut, however, but told me of the episode. Now ... John Hunter, I arrest you ..."

"Stop! All of you. I'll drill a hole in the first to move."

"Put that thing down ... You haven't a chance, Hunter."

"We'll see about that."

Costain, his fire-quenching finished, was standing quietly in the doorway and before anyone else could make a move, launched himself at Hunter. There was a report and the constable crumpled and sank to the floor.

Glaisher and Littlejohn were on Hunter in a trice and a free-for-all scuffle occurred. There was another report. This time it was Hunter. He had shot himself in the stomach in almost the same place as Costain.

Suddenly, in the doorway appeared a huge form in a serge suit and bowler hat.

"Wot's goin' on 'ere?"

It was P.C. Butt, all hot and bothered, back from the seaside. In one hand he held an enormous fibre suit-case and in the other a bunch of flowers and a hare. Over his shoulder peeped his astonished, kindly, horse-faced missus. They had missed their train home and had had to walk all the way from Melchester with their bag and baggage.



## 20.

### LAPAROTOMY

*“And the Lorde was With Joseph, and he was a luckie fellowe.”*

GENESIS XXXIX. 2 (*Tyndale translation*)

THEY performed two similar operations about midnight at Melchester general hospital, but the results were different.

Both patients had gaping wounds in their stomachs but, as the surgeon later told Littlejohn, in these cases a lot depends on what you’ve eaten for your last meal.

Poor Costain hadn’t had a bite since lunch-time, whereas Hunter had insisted on Cromwell’s stopping just outside Melchester for a meal and had eaten a lot of bread and cheese and drunk several pints of beer.

“There’s a chance the policeman will pull through,” said the doctors. “The youngster’s very bad, though ... It’s touch and go. In his case, the intestine’s blown to bits in places.”

Hunter died. But before that he managed to whisper a confession. He’d always hated Free. Always a jump ahead of him was Free. Beat him in scholarship exams at the elementary school, did him out of exhibitions at the university, spoiled him for a place in the football team, and finally stole his girl. So pleased with himself about it all, too. Made Hunter see red.

Costain came through it, but it took a long time and he was an invalid for months. So much so, that they pensioned him off and he left the force. Mrs. Costain was in such distress that she hadn’t any resistance left when old man Costain came over from Ballaugh and offered them his little farm to retire on.

“Always was a lucky ’un,” grumbled P.C. Butt to his wife when the news came through. “Wot did I get for my turn in ’ospital? Not even a thank-yew. While Costain gets a pension an’ a farm.”

So now Joe Costain milks his few cows, leans over his gate and chats to his cronies when he feels like it, and watches the trains go by, and waves his hand to those he knows in the carriages. So peaceful ... Time enough.

Laura Cruft wasn’t long in getting married. She did not press the matter of the defalcations in the trust and her husband regarded them with lofty contempt. He was worth half a million, made in the rag trade somewhere up North. He has a bald head, but they say he isn’t as old as he looks.

George Shortt is still wooing Jessie Fairfield. Things look more hopeful there.

Superintendent Glaisher was not in town to see Littlejohn off. There had been another murder in the county, but this time they didn’t call in Scotland Yard. It was so obvious who had done it that Glaisher solved it without removing his feet from the window-sill. All he needed to do was to go and arrest the criminal, a man who had crowned his mother-in-law with a beer-bottle under extreme provocation. The verdict was manslaughter.

So Inspector Stanley called for Littlejohn in the police car. He looked very hurt when he found the Inspector at *The Bird in Hand* instead of at the Golf Hotel.

“I thought you’d have been more at home among the golfers,” he said, hitching up his polka dots.

Littlejohn paid for Stanley a drink at the Golf, however, just to show there was no ill-feeling. It was raining and the golfers were out of temper. They had exhausted all their jokes and post-mortemed all their games, so were getting ready for a school of poker.

As the car passed through Melchester, it was held up by a procession. They were beating the bounds and the bishop, surrounded by a crowd of little boys, was on his way, under an umbrella, to castigate them at the various city gates.

“You ought to see this, sir. Only place in England where they do it this way.”

“My train leaves in ten minutes, thanks all the same,” grunted Littlejohn.

It was a slow train, too, which left Melchester half an hour before the express and arrived in London an hour after it.

But Littlejohn preferred it that way.

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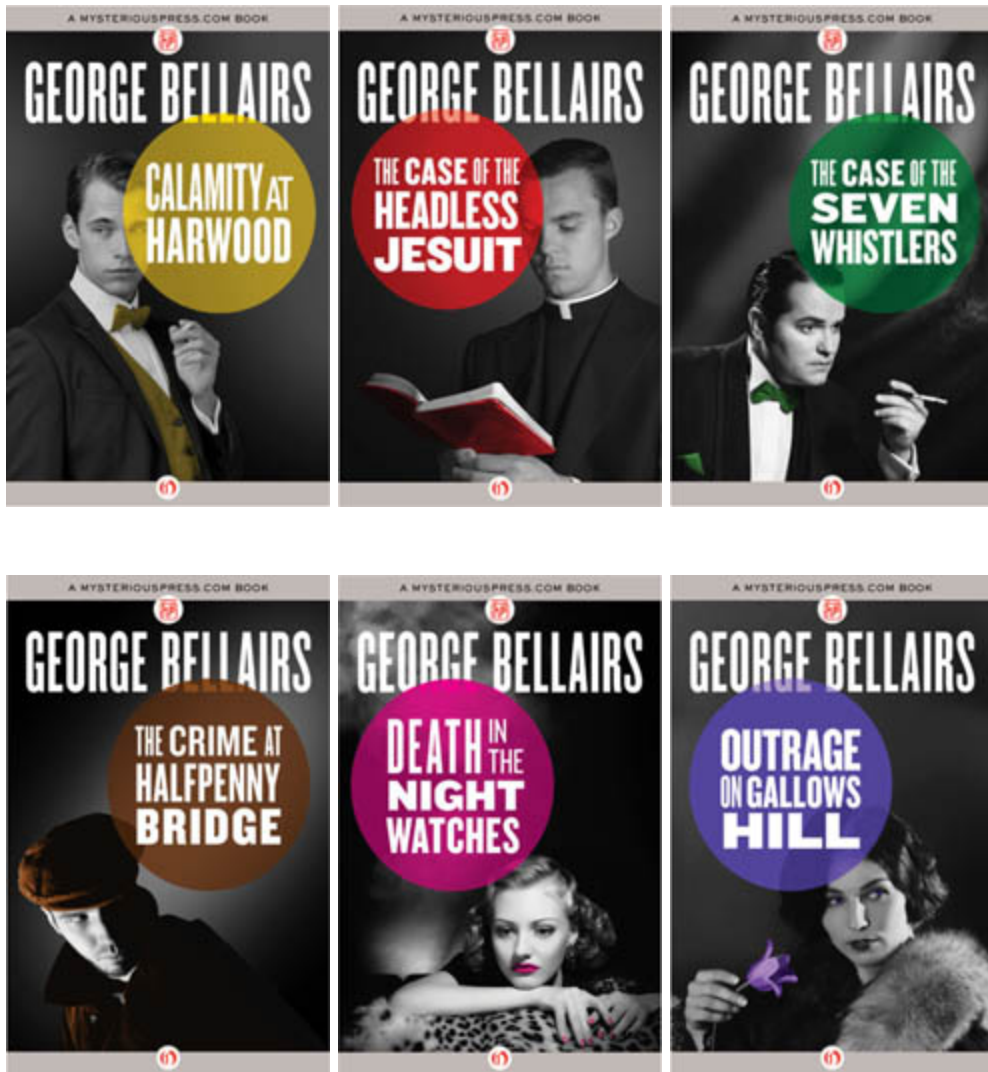
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